

Message for Sunday, 30th April, 2017
(Third Sunday of Easter)

(Acts 2.14a, 36-41, Ps 116:1-4, 11-18, 1 Peter 1:13-25, Luke 24:13-35)

Today, the Third Sunday of Easter, the Easter journey continues. In the reading from Acts we hear a powerful story of conversion while in 1 Peter we hear the beginning of a pastoral letter which in part draws on the past with words from Isaiah and is written to early churches struggling in the difficult social situation of their time.

But it is to our Gospel story that I am drawn to talk about in more depth today. It is the wonderful story of the two downcast disciples on their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

Luke is a very accomplished story teller, rarely more so than in the account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. In this story, Luke gives us the heart of Christian faith; that is, the Death and Resurrection of Jesus as well as a summary of the Resurrection appearances. He firmly links these with Scriptural tradition, the teaching of Jesus and the celebration of the Last Supper. There is much in this story and it grabs our attention right from the start.

For each of us, our reaction to this story from Luke will be slightly different – and one reason for that is the sheer volume of information contained in the story, but also it will depend on where we are in our own spiritual and life journey.

We may well find ourselves in the position of the travellers at the beginning of the story, trying to understand the meaning of what has happened and what this means for us, in our own experience of living.

Theologian and writer, Frederick Bruechner, provides a quite challenging interpretation of the meaning of Emmaus. He interprets Emmaus for each of us as ‘the place we go to in order to escape’ He says that “Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget”.

Or we may find ourselves agreeing with the scholar Alan Culpepper who says that for him, one of the most tantalising elements of the story is the report that as soon as the two disciples recognised the risen Lord he disappeared from their sight.

He writes that "God's presence is always elusive, fleeting, dancing at the edge of our awareness and perception. If we are honest, we must confess that it is never constant, steady or predictable.

For most of us, our awareness of the mystery of God's presence will always be transitory. We generally experience God's presence in fleeting moments, and then we return to the ordinary moments of our living.

He tells us that "For this reason, we learn to treasure religious experiences in retrospect. The two in Emmaus exclaim, "Did not our hearts burn within us?" Like Moses, we usually see only the back of God as God passes by. One of the secrets of a vigorous spirituality and a confident faith, therefore, is learning to appreciate the importance of meeting God in the past as well as in the present."

This Sunday's Gospel story is full of vitality. In the Greek language it is vigorous to say the least. The discussion of the two disciples leaving Jerusalem is heated and loud. The one who journeys with them shows them that they have missed the point of the Scriptures and missed the meaning of Jesus' mission. It is in the quiet of the blessing, that they recognise Jesus. He promptly disappears, and then they go, with hearts burning, back to Jerusalem where everyone is telling their story.

If we look carefully, we will see that an important part of the Easter story is that of people telling each other about their experiences. It begins with the testimony of the women and then the appearance to the two disciples on their Emmaus journey. Jesus chooses to spread the message of Resurrection, 'not through grandiose gestures but through the testimony of people who have seen something beyond their imagining which allows them to make sense not only of his awful execution, not only of their own experience but also of the Scriptures'. The writings of Sr Kym Harris remind us that 'the resurrected Jesus fulfils the needs of each human heart' – today just as then, and we will discover this in sharing and listening to the stories of each other.

The experience of the presence of God is not a private gift. In the discovery of the identity of the fellow traveller the disciples immediately returned to Jerusalem to share their experience with others. In sharing their stories of God's transcendent presence in their lives, the stories became a transforming – a life-changing reality.

Easter is not over at sundown Easter Sunday. It stretches into the rest of our lives. The two disciples might never meet the stranger again, but it

does not matter. Life would never be the same again. Luke's Gospel is full of theological insight when it stretches Easter day into the experiences that followed. This story becomes an extension of the Easter reality: The Lord is risen and he comes back to meet us on the road to Emmaus. (*Alan Culpepper New Interpreters Bible Commentary on Luke*)

I think we can say that the risen Lord meets us on the road to our 'Emmauses', in the ordinary places and experiences of our lives and in the places to which we retreat when life gets too much for us. This story in Luke's gospel cautions us however that God may come to us in unfamiliar forms and places, and often when we least expect it. It is often at our most vulnerable that we come to know God.

An ability to work on various levels of meaning is a fine quality to bring to the reading of the Gospels. We, the readers of this story, realise the slowness of the two disciples travelling to Emmaus. It is not only the identity of Jesus that they have missed but the meaning of the events of the past days and the significance of the Scriptures.

"But we had hoped..." the two disciples lament. They do so without realising that their hopes, their very limited hopes, had blinded them to the mystery taking place. They knew their own hopes...hopes for a liberated Israel at the very least. But had they wondered about God's hopes? They admit being astounded at what the women had said...and then disregarded it. Perhaps it was necessary for Jesus to disappear as soon as their eyes were opened or they may have tried to keep him yet again confined to their expectations, their hopes, their needs.

The story of the two disciples becomes our personal story unless we are always trying to look for and wonder at the abundance and goodness of God's love working in our world.

In our living, we understand that the same event will affect each of us differently. We have only to look at world events – the terrible things unfolding in Syria, the plight of refugees fleeing their homes in fear of their lives. For those experiencing this nightmare first hand, the horror is very different to those of us who see the events via our television sets.

Last Tuesday was Anzac Day and we all, in various ways, took time to remember all those brave men and women who have fought and who continue to fight in wars, conflicts and peace-keeping operations. There are stories that could be told for each person. There has been terrible loss of life, others have managed to come home but are forever changed. There

are stories of horror but also stories of heroism, sacrifice, compassion and love.

If we allow our understanding of events to be shaped only by our personal hopes and needs, we will fail to recognise God's love working in the world for our good. Though at times it can be difficult to understand, it is a love so large, that it can bring grace where horror, selfishness and greed once flourished; it can bring hope where despair, rejection and misery had reigned and life where death had seemed to triumph (Sr Kym Harris).

Let me conclude with an adaptation of Nathan Bierma's Prayer of Lament from the Road to Emmaus, entitled "We had Hoped".

Let us pray,

God of compassion and hope,

Lord, we voice our despair.
We had hoped you were our victory
We had hoped you were our earthly leader.
We had hoped you would remove the pain and the sorrow once and for all.

But then we saw suffering.
Then we saw injustice.

We saw blood on the ground.
We saw death.

And doubt swelled in our throats
and choked off our praise.
We had hoped.

Risen Lord, revitalize our hope.
Open our eyes to see your victory.
Open our hearts to know hope,
that even in death we may know life. Amen

(Acknowledgements: Alan Culpepper, Kym Harris, Frederick Bruechner, Nathan Bierma)