

“Let’s Walk in Their Shoes”

Our Gospel Lesson for this the third Sunday of Easter is power-packed. It highlights the living hope found only in the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. St. Paul wrote to his friends in Corinth, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead...” (1 Cor. 15: 19, 20) But on that first Easter day that living hope was far from being established in the experience of the two people we read about in today’s Gospel lesson. So let’s go for a walk this morning. Let’s put ourselves in the shoes of those two disciples who were making that seven mile walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus. It was a heart breaking experience.

Have you ever noticed that some of the saddest words in our language begin with the letter D? For example; disappointment, doubt, disillusionment, defeat, despair and death. All of these are summed up in the words of Cleopas and his companion to the stranger who joined them on the Emmaus road. They had left the dispirited and confused band of disciples with the events of Good Friday fresh in their memories. We can sympathize with their bewilderment.

The Master they had revered, loved and followed had been horribly put to death – a cruel death of the most degrading kind. Death by crucifixion was the most shameful of deaths; the victim was made a public spectacle, exposed to the jeers of all who passed by. Only a week before, on Palm Sunday, the disciples’ hopes had risen to fever pitch when the excited crowds had hailed their Master as the longed-for deliverer from the tyranny of Roman occupation but now he lay dead in a sealed tomb. Their hopes were dashed; the dream was over!

The band of Jesus’ followers was leaderless and was falling apart, with two of them already on their way home. The reports that Jesus’ tomb was empty did nothing to alter their thinking; it only confused them. Their entire world had come apart. The two despondent disciples summed up the situation very neatly, “we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.”

Human hope is a fragile thing and when it withers it’s hard to revive. Hopelessness as a disease of the human spirit is desperately hard to cure. When you see someone you love and care for overtaken by illness, which goes on and on and on, despair sets in. It almost becomes impossible to hope for recovery, to be afraid to hope because of not being able to cope with another letdown.

The Emmaus disciples had erected a wall of hopelessness around them, and they were trapped in their misery. “We had hoped . . .” What they were saying is “We don’t expect it now, but once we did. We had it, this thing called hope, but now it’s gone.” I wonder if this is something that we can identify with? Has someone or something come between our relationship with God? If so, listen to the Emmaus story because the heart-breaking experience is only its beginning!

As the travelers made their weary way to Emmaus a stranger came alongside them. It was going to be one of the most wonderful walks in history! We know, of course, that it was the risen Jesus, but somehow they didn’t recognize him. In fact, Luke tells us, “they were kept from recognizing him.” It wasn’t an accident that they didn’t notice who he is or that they were too preoccupied to look at him in the eye. No, they weren’t allowed to recognize Jesus for a purpose. It was that they might be in the same position as ourselves some 2,000 plus year later.

The stranger asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” And so they poured out their sad story to someone who seemed willing to listen. How wonderfully kind and compassionate is our Lord. He could well have ticked them off, to say the least, for their lack of faith in him. Hadn’t he told them that “unless a seed dies, it abides alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit?” (John 12:24) But no, Jesus doesn’t berate them, but rather as someone put it in moving words, “In his infinite courtesy, Jesus remembered the frailty of over-strained nerves and bewildered minds and came, not too suddenly or overwhelming upon them, but in a way which he alone could do, revealed Himself as the Risen Christ.”

The way that Jesus dealt with the situation is a lesson to all who are in a position to help those who have lost hope. They need companionship. They need a listening ear before a stream of good advice. The last thing they need is a brisk “cheering up” talk or being told to “snap out of it”. Instead, let’s be there with them. Let’s love them by listening, by accepting what it is they feel. There will be time later to point them to the way of hope, to the One in whom hope is to be found, but first things first. It’s only then that the heart-breaking experience changes to a Heart-searching experience.

Their spokesman, Cleopas, expressed surprise at even being asked what was worrying them, “Are you the only one living in Jerusalem who doesn’t know the things that have happened there in these days?” There seems to be a note of incredulity in the voice of Cleopas, but Jesus continues patiently and innocently asks, “What things?” “About Jesus of Nazareth,” they eagerly replied.

The two Emmaus bound disciples were correct in their theology as far as it went. They told the stranger that this Jesus “was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.” “He was...” notice the use of the past tense, which strongly implies that he wasn’t relevant to the present or otherwise they wouldn’t have been in their present downcast state of mind. Their

experience of Jesus was in the past, and they thought they were alone. The cross had taken him from them, and their minds hadn't made sense of the changed situation, or adjusted to it. The cross was just a great negative to them.

We've all heard exciting testimonies of what Jesus has done in the past – but what about the present? The past is history. The question must be: is Jesus “a present, bright reality” to those who give their experience, to you and me? Do we always recognize him beside us? Life has many distractions – hard work, routine tiredness, ill health – which can so grind us down that we may carry on mechanically, never lifting our eyes – or minds – from the dust of the earthly road we travel. We become unaware of the glory and strength of his presence with us. Life loses its meaning and leaves us washed out, but this story gives us hope.

Jesus is still there. He is the unseen stranger walking with us and if we are willing to hear his voice, revealing himself to us. As the two disciples spoke of the cross, he took hold of their bewilderment and sorrow and gave them a heart-warming experience. How did he do it? He pointed them to God's self-revelation in the Scriptures. Luke tells us, “And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus explained to them what was said in Scriptures concerning himself.”

Jesus must have given the Emmaus travelers the greatest Old Testament exposition in history – to a congregation of two. From all that Jesus shared with them from the Old Testament Scriptures gave them proof that Jesus had fulfilled that which had been prophesied over the centuries; that these Old Testament anticipations of his passion and triumph of life over death, proved that He was indeed the Messiah. The two disciples couldn't have expected that sharing their problem with the stranger on the Emmaus Road brought them toward a solution. But there was more to it than that. Christ wasn't there beside them simply to help them find solutions – he was in the problem itself. Jesus told his two listeners, “Did not the Christ have to suffer these things...”

The problem for the disciples was how to make sense of the cross, how to accept it. Jesus helped them do that, showing them that the cross was the creative act of God. The apostle Paul would later write, “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not counting men's sins against them: (2 Cor. 5:19). The cross of shame and suffering had become the cross of redemption for all who would come to Jesus in repentance and faith.

When Jesus intrudes into our lives, probing our thoughts, it is for the purpose of blessing us. But how do we respond? Do we, like the disciples from Emmaus, welcome his initiative and let him minister to us? Do we want him to keep talking and explaining what previously baffled us? Sometimes the things he reveals are uncomfortable as he encroaches into our conscience, and invades the private areas of our lives.

Cleopas and his companion accepted the gentle rebuke that Jesus made, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken.” Perhaps the key is “all”. It wasn't that they hadn't read the prophets of old, but perhaps they had the Scriptures selectively, concentrating on those parts that spoke of a triumphant Messiah who would be kind to his enemies and be victorious. The passages that spoke of a suffering servant didn't fit in with their expectation of the Messiah and they'd tended to skip over them. When they had been given the exposition from the Scriptures they reacted positively, and in fact they wanted even more, which led them to a heart burning experience.

Their two hour journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus must have seemed like five minutes, being so wrapped up in this absorbing conversation with the Lord whom they hadn't yet recognized. Luke informs us that, “As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he was going further.” Jesus wasn't going to force himself on them if they didn't want him to spend more time with them. He awaited their invitation to come in. In Revelation 3: 19-20 we find his words, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”

There is a famous painting of this scene, of Jesus knocking at the door, but there is no handle to it. I expect there is a handle but it's on the inside. This is very much the situation in the Emmaus story. We're told that “Jesus acted as if he was going further.” It was a test to see if the disciples had more appetite for the things of God. They did. We're told, “They urged Jesus strongly, ‘Stay with us...’” That's the sort of invitation Jesus can't resist! He went in to stay with them.”

They needn't have asked him in; he was ready to move on. But no, their hearts had been won over. A basic meal was quickly prepared. The bread is on the table and the moment for Jesus' disclosure has come. How does he do it? “He took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.” It was the action of the breaking of the bread. They saw his hands – they were different from when he had broken bread at the feeding of the five thousand and at the last supper. They were the nail-pierced hands of Jesus. In an instant they knew him. And in an instant, he is gone.

Why did Jesus have to disappear? Couldn't he have stayed longer? He could, but he didn't because it's all part of the education of his last 40 days on earth – how to manage without his bodily presence from now on; exactly as we have to do some 2,000 years later. But he is with us still by His Spirit; he is with us as we fellowship with him in worship, as we read his words to us, as we share in the sacraments of water/Word, bread and wine.

I can imagine Cleopas and his friend standing in amazement; perhaps embracing in great joy, asking each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” Their world had come together again. That heart-burning experience is something that we all need. We need it as the Holy Spirit works through the Word and applies the truths of that Word to our daily walk with Jesus.

Well, where are we in our experience? Are we still heart-breaking because we need to meet the risen Christ? Perhaps we are still in the heart-searching process – if so, let it continue as it will surely lead to the heart – burning experience we all need. God deeply longs for each one of us to walk with him in close fellowship so he can fulfill his plans in our lives. God’s ways are not always obvious, so our hearts must be open to allow him to enlighten our understanding, to take us to a new level in our spiritual journeys. Life will never be the same again.

Christ is risen from the dead! Christ is our Savior! Christ is the hope for this world! The two disciples lost no time in retracing their steps to Jerusalem to share the Good News. May that be our experience this Easter time and for the rest of our lives. Amen.

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