

## Readings for the Third Sunday of Easter

23<sup>rd</sup> April 2023

### First Reading: Acts 2:14a,36-41

On the day of Pentecost, Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd,

‘Let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.’

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’ Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.’ And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added to their number.

### Second Reading: 1 Peter 1:17-23

If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.

### Gospel: St Luke 24:13-35

On that same day, two of the disciples were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, ‘Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?’ Jesus asked them, ‘What things?’ They replied, ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were

with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see Jesus.’ Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized Jesus; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

### **A Reflection for the Third Sunday of Easter**

This week, our Gospel reading gives us another incident on the first Easter Day in which the risen Jesus appeared to some of his followers. Last week, we heard how Jesus appeared to some of the disciples hiding in a locked room, and how Thomas, who wasn’t there at the time doubted what they had seen until he saw it for himself. Today, we hear Luke’s account of the two disciples walking to Emmaus that same day who also met with the risen Jesus.

Although we only hear the road to Emmaus story on a Sunday once every three years, it also comes up in the weekday readings on the Wednesday after Easter. So it was that, about ten days ago, a few of us were discussing why it was that the disciples often didn’t recognise the risen Jesus, or, at least, not immediately.

When Mary Magdalene met Jesus in the garden early on that first Easter morning, she didn’t recognise him until he spoke her name. Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus appears to seven of the disciples on a beach after a fruitless night’s fishing and tells them to cast their nets on the other side. They don’t recognise him until they have a massive haul of fish when we are told that the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter ‘It is the Lord’. And here today, in Luke’s Gospel, two disciples, one identified as Cleopas, the other a member of the same household, possibly his wife, have Jesus walking and talking with them on their journey, but don’t recognise him until much later, at supper. We can speculate on the dimness of the early morning light in the garden, or the distance of the boat from the shore at the beach, or even that grief would have blinded them to Jesus, especially as we don’t expect to see someone who has died alive again. But, it is just speculation - the Bible doesn’t say. Even here, in this passage from Luke, in a situation where lack of light or a long distance do not apply, we are told ‘their eyes were kept from recognising him’.

In the Bible, issues related to seeing or recognising something or someone are often related to understanding. Here, it is not sufficient simply to see the risen Jesus; it is necessary to recognise and understand who he is. To understand takes time and is more than just being told something. The seven mile walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus was more than a brief chat, and the conversation between the disciples and Jesus became a process of deepening understanding, implied by the disciples’ later declaration: ‘were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?’

If we are familiar with this story, some of its surprising qualities can be lost. Whilst other disciples were hiding in fear of their lives, and not without cause, these two open up to an apparent stranger on the road. That was actually quite a dangerous thing to do as it quickly becomes apparent from what they say that they were followers of a man who has just been executed as a criminal.

What had taken place in Jerusalem over the preceding three days was widely known, but what it signified was much less clear. These disciples reveal their sense of confusion: Jesus, who they had thought was a prophet mighty in deed and word, the hoped for redeemer, appears not be any such thing. Then there is their sense of betrayal: that it was their own chief priests and leaders who had handed him over for trial and crucifixion. And there is their sense of astonishment and disbelief: that the women who had been at the tomb that very morning claimed that Jesus was alive.

So it is that Jesus, this stranger on the road as they think, sets the events of those three days in the context of the Scriptures and of God's great plan for the redemption of creation through the Messiah. He explains and teaches, much as he had done previously with his disciples on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem. The earlier group, like these two, had not recognised or understood what he meant. It was only when he was invited into their house, where, oddly, he was the host at the meal with its echoes of the Last Supper, that, in the breaking of bread the penny finally dropped and they understood and recognised Jesus for who he is. At which point he vanished, which perhaps confirms that it is not the seeing that is important but the understanding.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish theologian and philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, said that, in a sense, those who were eyewitnesses to the Easter events were almost too close to them. It takes time and transformation by the Holy Spirit to come to faith; divine revelation and divine grace are needed to understand the meaning of the historical facts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Nevertheless, despite their proximity to the events, the two disciples on the Emmaus road experienced that divine revelation and divine grace first-hand. And then they just had to tell others right away, no matter what, no matter how inconvenient or late the hour, not matter how surprising or unlikely their story. They rushed back to Jerusalem to discover that Peter had also encountered the risen Jesus. Luke is probably making a further point here: their testimony, together with Peter's would have fulfilled the Jewish legal requirement for two (male) witnesses to establish truth.

But perhaps Kierkegaard's point is more relevant to us today. We need time and transformation by the Holy Spirit to come to faith, often a lot more time than the few hours it would have taken to get from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Some people see in this story a metaphor for the whole Christian life.

Our Christian life is often likened to a journey. Like the Emmaus road for those walking it, it is a long journey where at times God may be close but seems hidden from us. It is a journey in which, at times, we may feel confused or constrained, perhaps by the uncertainties of others. It is a journey in which we have to learn to trust our travelling companions. It is a journey in which Scripture is examined and re-examined through Christ's revelation and in the light of our own experiences. Perhaps, above all, it is a journey into a community of belief, encompassing the living and the departed, which is defined by the grace and truth of God in Christ, and in which we support one another as we look outwards to those with whom we are called to share the Gospel message.

We too encounter the risen Jesus in the words of Scripture and in the sacrament of sharing in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. In these we learn to trust in God's promises; we recognise Jesus for who he is; we are renewed by Christ's presence with us through his Spirit; and we respond faithfully, following his example of listening and sharing, to enable others to find meaning in the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.