

3rd Sunday of Easter 2020

Our Gospel today tells us of two disciples, Cleopas and his unnamed companion who, with their hopes in Jesus shattered, leave Jerusalem for Emmaus on the Sunday afternoon following his death. On the way they recount to Jesus, whom they meet on their journey but as yet do not recognise, what had happened over the previous few days. They confide in him that they had been astonished by Mary Magdalene and some other women who said that an angel had declared that Jesus had risen from the dead. The two made it clear that they did not believe what Mary had said about him.

The unrecognised companion then rebuked them: “you foolish men! So slow to believe the full message of the prophets!” The rejection of testimony to Jesus’ resurrection seems to have been the universal response amongst his disciples. During his ministry in Galilee he had foretold his death and resurrection and had said “Let these words sink into your ears.” But their response was incomprehension.

In contrast, now listening to Jesus the two disciples are able to understand the Scriptures about the suffering Messiah rising from the dead, entering into glory as the Son of Man. Their hearts were on fire “while he was opening the scriptures to them.” His death no longer signalled the end of their hopes. They had grasped its meaning.

Nearing Emmaus, Jesus, still unrecognised, accepted their invitation to supper: “Stay with us because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” And now we have the climax of the story as the disciples identify Jesus when “he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them,” the same four actions of Jesus associated with the feeding of the 5000 in Galilee, “which in Luke’s account is immediately followed by Peter’s recognition of him as the Messiah,” and the same actions associated with Jesus at the Last Supper. In this moment of recognition Jesus is the Bread of life in the Eucharist, completing his feeding of them through teaching them the meaning of Scripture about his death.

The supper at Emmaus has become a subject for many great artists over the centuries. One acknowledged masterly depiction of the scene is that of Caravaggio dating from 1601. He captures the moment of recognition – Jesus’ hand raised, blessing the bread - dramatically using light and shade and perspective.

Among the painting’s subtleties noted by commentators two in particular appeal to me. In the foreground of the painting there is a basket of food close, we might say too close, to the edge of the table. As one critic says, “Like the world that these [two disciples] knew, the basket of food teeters dangerously over the edge of the table.” The painting perhaps is saying that it is the risen Jesus who holds things together, stopping them, and ourselves, falling into chaos.

There is a fourth person in the painting, the one serving the three at table. He is standing in the background and appears oblivious to the drama that is unfolding before him. Could this not be a subtle warning that I, like him, may fail to enter into the mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection?

In conclusion: Luke’s account of the journey to Emmaus gives us much. We have the outline of the Christian understanding of the Old Testament and how it points to Jesus’ paschal mystery. Then our evangelist gives us the risen Jesus, our Bread of life through word and Eucharist - our companion, though often unrecognized, as each one of us journeys through life. And he who among all the Gospel writers most consistently draws attention to Jesus at prayer has left us the simple and striking prayer of Cleopas and his companion, “Stay with us Lord, since evening is approaching,” a prayer that is answered in the gifts of Word and Sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

– Fr David Willis OP