

Homily: Third Sunday of Easter, 26th April 2020

Today's Gospel must be one of the most popular stories of the life of Jesus, and with good reason. It's a beautiful and encouraging story. It's a story which connects with our experience of the risen Lord. It's a journey from despair to hope. And perhaps, as we listen to it, we realise that it's a journey we are making with these disciples: a journey from doubt and uncertainty to a deep and certain faith in the risen Lord. As I imagine this scene, I find myself thinking that if it were a film or tv drama, I'd be willing these disciples to recognise Him! We listen to this Gospel and wonder, "Why don't they know who He is?" Yet we know from the other resurrection appearances of Jesus that the disciples were often slow to recognise Him – in some way, His identity was hidden from them. And we know from our own experience that so often He is present and active in our lives, and we don't realise it until later, after the event.

It's very striking that these disciples know the whole story of Jesus. Cleopas outlines the Gospel, step by step: Jesus "proved He was a great prophet by the things He said and did in the sight of God and the whole people", he says – this is the Lord's earthly ministry. "The chief priests and leaders handed Him over to be sentenced to death, and had Him crucified". And they have heard that the tomb is empty and angels have announce the resurrection. They know the whole story: the Lord's ministry, death and resurrection – the problem is, they don't believe. They lack faith – that is why they have no hope. Even as the risen Lord walks alongside them, they do not believe in Him. Faith makes all the difference – faith is the seed of hope.

As we know, in the end, Cleopas and his companion do come to faith and they find hope and joy in their meeting with the risen Lord. But it doesn't happen by their own efforts – quite the opposite. There's a lovely turnaround in this story. At the start, Jesus asks them what they are talking about. They are a bit taken aback: "How can you not know?" they ask. So the Lord listens patiently as they tell Him everything that has happened *to Him* these last few days. Then He speaks to them about the scriptures: "How can *you* not know", He asks, "that these things had to take place? How can you not know that they fulfil the scriptures?" They think they are the ones who know what has happened – but the Lord is teaching them. And when they get to the village, the same thing happens: they think they are the hosts and Jesus is their guest, but He takes the role of the host, breaking the bread and giving it to them as His Body. He is the one who gives.

It's clear how this appearance of the risen Lord mirrors what happens each time we celebrate Mass. First, there is a gathering of the disciples – on the Emmaus road, only two, but a gathering, nonetheless. "Where two or three gather in my name, I will be there", the Lord promised. He is true to His word. They bring with them the events of their week, their memories, their disappointments. Then the Lord speaks to them, and their hearts burn within them as they listen. Then He takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them, and they recognise Him. And finally, they rush back to Jerusalem to share the news and the joy of their encounter with the risen Lord.

All of this happens at every Mass. There is a gathering of disciples – us. We come with our hopes, our disappointments, our plans and fears for the future, everything that has happened in the last few days, and the Lord listens patiently to these things in our hearts. He already knows. We hear readings in which Jesus speaks to us, giving us hope, making sense of our lives. Sometimes, if we hear Him, our hearts burn within us. Then we offer Him what we have: bread and wine, symbols of our lives and work, our joys and sufferings. But He becomes the host: He takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to us as His Body, exactly as He did at Emmaus. And at the end of each Mass, we are sent out to share with others the Christ we have received. “Go forth, the Mass is ended.”

And, just as on the Emmaus road, a strange role reversal takes place. We come to tell the Lord about our lives, but we receive news of His life, which gives us joy. We bring to the altar what we have to offer, and He becomes the host, returning to us a much greater gift. We talk of the ‘offertory’ in Mass – we offer to God what we have – but how much more do we receive? The Lord is never outdone in generosity. Whatever we offer to Him is repaid many times over. Water offered to Him is turned to wine; five loaves and two fish become enough to feed 5000. Mortal life offered to Him becomes eternal life, eternal joy in His presence. Time offered to Him in prayer becomes a life-giving source of grace. We think when we come to Mass we are doing something for God, but in truth, it’s all His work. There’s a wonderful tradition in some Eastern churches, that, before the Mass starts, the deacon goes to the priest to prompt him to begin, and says to him, “It is time for the Lord to act.” Not us, but the Lord. It is all His work.

We like to give, but we also know that in giving, we receive. In these days our opportunities for both giving and receiving are perhaps more limited than we are used to; but let’s give what we can – time to God and others – in whatever way we can, and find that we receive through this. The Emmaus disciples were transformed by their encounter with the Lord: they went from despair to hope, sadness to joy; from giving to receiving; even the direction of travel changes – they no longer walk away from Jerusalem and from the other disciples, but back towards them, returning to the Holy City and the other members of the infant Church. We need the risen Lord’s presence, and perhaps we feel that need this Easter more than any other in recent times. Everything changes when He is with us. And so we pray:

Risen Lord Jesus, walk with us. Explain the scriptures to us, and make our hearts burn within us. Give meaning to the events of our lives. Let us soon return to Your table to recognise You in the Breaking of Bread, and to receive from Your hand. And, knowing You, let us share with others the joy and the peace which You alone can bring. Amen.

Fr Andrew

