

Third Sunday of Easter 2017

The Road to Emmaus

As the Easter events begin to wind down Cleopas and his companion are heading toward a little village, of no significance, called Emmaus. They did not believe the message of the resurrection because they had probably received so much that is known these days as fake news, that they were totally confused, bewildered and probably a little bit cross.

Puzzled and discouraged they are unable to see any liberation in the death, the empty tomb, or the message about the appearances of Jesus to the others in their group. In their eyes, either the mission of Jesus had entirely failed, or else they themselves had been badly deceived in their expectations about Jesus.

When we meet the disciples on the road to Emmaus, it is evening and the glow of that first Easter day has begun to fade. Resurrection for them is nothing more than a rumour or a tale and it would remain that way as they fail to recognize Jesus.

Without being aware of what they are really saying along the road, the two disciples profess many of the central elements of the creed of the Christian faith, yet they remain blind to the necessity of Jesus' suffering predicted in the Scriptures. They are so caught up with their own sadness that they fail to recognize Jesus. The stranger on the road to Emmaus takes the scepticism and curiosity of the disciples and weaves them into the fabric of the Scripture. Jesus challenges them to reinterpret the events of the past days in light of the Scriptures. However, Cleopas and his companion are "foolish and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have said!"

The Emmaus disciples saw their hopes and dreams dashed and crushed. Theirs is a piercing cry: "We were hoping...". Possibly like Judas and some of the populist cults they were expecting this Jesus to be a mighty liberator or warrior. They never imagined the outcome of that terrible Friday on a hill outside the walls of Jerusalem. We know what happens when such feelings overtake us: we become despondent, indifferent, cynical and sad. How many times have we been similar to the two disciples on the road, uttering those same words: "We were hoping..." .

We were hoping that wars, violence and terrorism would have ceased. We were hoping that the economic crisis would not have affected our family, resulting in job loss and uncertainty. We were hoping that the ravages of sickness and ageing would have spared a loved one or even ourselves much physical and mental anguish. Like those on the road to Emmaus, do we not feel that we are victims of time, fate, circumstance and external factors?

We cannot live without hope but we must be wise in our hoping. Given the cultural and social context in which we live there is a risk of reducing Christian hope to an ideology to group slogans, to mere appearances and feelings. Nothing could be more opposite to Jesus' message! He does not want His disciples to simply recite a message of hope. He wants them to **be** hope.

To believe in the resurrection does not mean we embrace fleeting ideologies, secular strategies, cheap slogans and catchy themes. It means that we fall in love with the Risen Lord and remain in an intimate relationship with him. Apart from Him we can do nothing.

“Stay with us, Lord, for it is nearly evening...”

This was the fervent plea that the two disciples addressed to the stranger who had walked with them along the road to Emmaus. “Stay with us” is also the prayer of the early Church to the Risen Lord that He will not abandon them. The nightfall at Emmaus is not only the sunset of that first Easter but it marks the night of faith and doubt, uncertainty and obscurity, confusion and chaos. As Christians, we know that this night is always followed by the dawn of faith and hope. This is illustrated beautifully by the words of Gregory the Great who was Pope from 590AD until his death in 604AD, a mere seventy six years before a church first appeared in this place. Gregory is famous for instigating the first recorded large-scale mission from Rome to convert the masses to Christianity.

“Since daybreak or dawn is changed gradually from darkness into light, the church... is fittingly called daybreak or dawn. The dawn hints that the night is over. It does not yet proclaim the full light of day. While dawn dispels darkness and welcomes the light, it holds both of them, the one mixed with the other... Are not all of us who follow the truth in this life daybreak and dawn?”

Amidst the shadows of the passing day and the darkness that clouded the disciples' spirit, the stranger brought a ray of light that rekindled their hope. "Stay with us", they pleaded.

In the intimacy of the breaking of the bread, the disciples' eyes were opened and they recognized the Risen Christ in their midst. How often do we turn to the Lord and plead, like the two on the road: "Stay with us!" We know the rest of the story. It was when the stranger broke bread with them the blindness was removed from their eyes and they saw the reality that is Jesus.

As a church we here are on the Emmaus road. We know the reality of the Resurrection story and we have seen the Risen Lord in the breaking of the bread which happens here Sunday by Sunday. But like Cleopas and his friends we are not sure how the aspiration will work out in reality. Remember those words of Gregory the Great;

"Since daybreak or dawn is changed gradually from darkness into light, the church... is fittingly called daybreak or dawn... Are not all of us who follow the truth in this life daybreak and dawn?"

This Saturday will, I hope and pray, be a time when the reality of being daybreak and dawn people will start to happen and like Cleopas and his friends we will truly see a vision beginning to happen.

For many years we have been carrying on our own dream. There has been change and some pain. There has been change and some gain. We have moved away from our financial comfort zone and have taken the leap in faith by building our new Hall. (On that subject I think the time has come to stop referring to it as the "new" Hall.)

The Vision process has got to start somewhere. This Saturday Steve Cox, from the Diocese mission and evangelism team, is coming to confer with PCC members the way ahead for us as a congregation.

It starts with the PCC, your elected representatives, and will soon involve us all. I hope that we will support by prayer those involved in this important process for the future of our parish.

We are like Cleopas on the road to Emmaus. We seek the truth and vision of what is to come. We want to get away from the fake news of today and make the good news of Jesus a reality in our church and our community.

The disciples found themselves in a very bewildering experience. It was new, it was challenging and it was taking a step into the unknown and that is **our** situation as a parish and as a community. Like Cleopas and his companion, we are on a journey.

I suspect we have known for some time that we were needing to face up to the reality of our present situation. We need to go forward as Gregory the Great reminds us;

“Since daybreak or dawn is changed gradually from darkness into light, the church... is fittingly called daybreak or dawn. The dawn hints that the night is over. It does not yet proclaim the full light of day. While dawn dispels darkness and welcomes the light, it holds both of them, the one mixed with the other... Are not all of us who follow the truth in this life daybreak and dawn?”

This is probably one of the most important sermons I have preached since I have been with you and I regard the Vision process as the most important issue we face together as a parish. It will appear on our St Mary’s website tomorrow morning if it would be helpful to down load it and read it as a reflection.

We must be, as Gregory the Great reminds us,

“Are not all of us who follow the truth in this life daybreak and dawn?”

It was at daybreak and dawn that Mary Magdalene discovered the empty tomb. Genesis would suggest to us that Creation was an early morning, daybreak and dawn event.

My prayer is that we should follow in that way.

Amen.