

The Third Sunday of Easter - 26.04.20

Readings: Acts 2:14a, 36-41; 1 Pet. 1:13-25; Lk. 24:13-35.

Sermon by Rev'd Stephen Monsieigneur

Have you ever found yourself so worried by something only to discover that you had the solution as they say, 'at your fingertips', but you were simply too preoccupied to recognise it? This is the situation in today Gospel where Cleopas and the other disciple find themselves as they walk the road toward Emmaus.

It is the third day after the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus and as the disciples journey, they are sharing their thoughts, I would suggest trying to make sense of a chaotic series of events of the past few days which as it appears have failed to turn out as they had hoped and likely, have created a good deal of confusion. Remember it was the expectation of these disciples and probably the broader groups of Jesus followers that Jesus was going to redeem Israel.

Looking back to the triumphal reception of Jesus into Jerusalem, what we celebrate as Palm Sunday, most were likely thinking of the redemption offered by Jesus as freedom from the oppression of Rome, a return to self-independence, possibly even practical power over others. But that did not happen.

These two disciples know Jesus died on the cross, they know he was entombed and now his body is missing; and then the report by the women of the empty tomb and the appearance and declaration of the angel that Jesus is alive. Really, if so where was Jesus? The disappointment of both men is almost palpable.

Imagine yourself in their sandals. What would be your thoughts, seriously Jesus was dead, if he has risen why has he not appeared to his closest friends.

Then Jesus joins them as they walk and for some reason that simply makes no sense both men fail to recognise not only their teacher but friend. Now there is nothing to indicate panic among these disciples as they walked, but it is quite reasonable to believe they were extremely preoccupied with their own thoughts. To coin a phrase 'they were in another world'. Imagine yourself failing to recognise a friend even after some hours talking with them.

We learn that '...they were kept from recognising him.' Seriously what is going on? What is it that 'kept' the disciples from recognising Jesus? Rather than answering this question in an absolute sense I will regard it as a pointer toward the significance of being open to God's presence in our lives instead of hyper focused on the mundane.

It was not until after Jesus reiterates his story in light of the prophecies culminating with the shared the meal that the two understood and thus recognised him; 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?' (V 32)

It was with surprise they recognised it was Jesus the whole time yet the two were so distracted that they did not see him for who he was.

Today marks the third Sunday of Easter, some weeks after the Emmaus Road incident, a time when the resurrected Jesus is appearing, and as we heard in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles confidence is growing in a fledgling church as they begin to understand the teachings and recognise the association of Jesus life, death and resurrection to the prophetic scriptures.

For us some two-thousand years later the Easter season continues as a time of renewal in our personal relationship and communal faith in God. But this year many of us are again preoccupied with the demands of life, personal challenges or global concerns. I wonder, given the many times throughout our lives have we celebrated God's desire to know us and held tight the hope of Gods promise for us to be reunited in the divine. How often have we taken Easter for granted? A ritual that we participate in as [just] another part of our busy lives. How often have we, challenged as the disciples were, actually failed to recognise Jesus when he walks with us?

In a world responding to the covid-19 pandemic the Easter we were expecting when we celebrated Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent, the Easter full of ritual that drew us into the celebration of Easter Sunday, the lighting of the Pascal candle, the first Eucharist of Easter and other rituals, has simply not turned out as we expected.

Over recent weeks with the closure of our church buildings and the inability to gather as a community in a common place for worship, I have heard a number of people say this Easter does not feel like Easter. When I have enquired why, the frequent response is around the fact that being unable to share as a gathered community in our church buildings the Easter liturgy and Eucharist.

Many of us have celebrated Easter in the same tradition for many decades. We have grown accustomed to being part of a set style of worship that meets their spiritual needs. The journey is familiar and so enhances our expectation of gaining new depth in our relationship with Jesus. It may well be the familiarity of time, place and ritual that facilitates this journey but things have not gone to plan. This year we are forced to explore new ways of meeting Jesus, online services, prepared resources for use in our homes and so on.

But for some Easter services online just are not the same as being in the church building, we can become focussed on ritual such as when or even am I supposed to stand, kneel or sit, where is the music? Confusion and disorientation cloud our ability to meet and recognise Jesus, and we become like the two on the road.

Now while this can all sound quite dark, we might even begin to question our own faith, we must not lose hope. The Church, not the institution or buildings, but the people are not strangers to persecution, to having their faith in Jesus ridiculed. Peter in his first letter, was writing to encourage parts of the church experiencing persecution. Peter writes urging the

people to remain faithful to Jesus. He does not deny the difficulty of remaining faithful, rather he highlights it as something we should expect.

Peter was of course referring to persecution by others rather than the challenges of life itself especially in 2020, but his point remains valid. In the passage we read today we hear Peter calling us in these challenging times to remember our baptism into Gods family, to remember the promises we reaffirm each Easter and to recognise the great gift of hope we have received through this.

I have heard and strongly dispute the claim that we are through the pain in our world, being punished by God. NO! .. WE ARE NOT. We are being called in light of new challenges that change how we conduct our daily lives to open our hearts, our minds, to use our senses to recognise Jesus in new and possibly unexpected ways walking with us. To explore and find new ways of being a church, new ways of being a worshipping community. These are challenges that with Jesus at our side we will meet with success. We each may even be surprise at new skills we personally develop and can take forward into areas of ministry we have never considered before.

Let us pray.

O God, even as Jesus faced death your presence gave him strength.

May we faced with the many varied challenges in our lives never be so paralysed that we fail to recognise you in our midst. Let us know the strength we need to work past the challenges that we may recognise you whomever we meet and whatever we achieve. May the challenge of closure of church buildings not hinder but encourage a stronger commitment to worship.

God of the lost, we ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.