

HOMILY FOR THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER 2020

Scripture Readings: Acts of the Apostles 2:14, 22-28; First Letter of Peter 1:17-21; Luke 24:13-35

Reflection

Fr Tao Pham

The story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is one of the loveliest stories in the Gospel. The risen Jesus joined them on the road, explained the Scriptures to them, and then revealed himself in the breaking of bread.

The death that Jesus went through had certainly shattered the hopes of his immediate followers. They were sure now that he was gone and not even ready to recognize Jesus when he in fact appeared in his risen state to the Emmaus disciples and others. The hope of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus was that Jesus would set Israel free. St Luke does not specify just what freedom they had in mind but more than likely it was about Israel's freedom from the Roman yoke, leading to the re-establishment of the Israelite state. But the freedom that Jesus brings is something at once more particular and more universal. It is freedom from the yoke of sin that troubles everyone, whether Jew or Gentile, and that turns us into oppressors driven by fear of the other. In order to be free, we need to 'see' our liberator and the kind of liberation that he brings. St. Luke's wonderful story of the on the road to Emmaus unfolds key stages in this liberating experience.

Jesus challenges them to look at the Scriptures again, this time through his eyes, and see that the passage of the Christ through suffering and death to glory is in reality the fulfilment of the Scriptures. In fulfilling the Scriptures Jesus transforms the meaning of the claim of the Gospel that he is the only one who can reveal the full meaning of the Scriptures.

The road to Emmaus represents the road of disappointment, failure, sorrow, grief, and broken dreams. The risen Lord is with us on this road, even though we may not recognise him. He shows us that God brings good out of evil, life out of death, and glory out of pain and suffering. These two disciples to whom the Lord came were not in Jerusalem, not in the upper room, not even near the garden tomb. They were on an ordinary road, travelling to a small village a few miles from Jerusalem whose location is not even certain anymore. We don't even know what that village was known for back then. It teaches us that the Risen Christ can join us wherever we are. We don't have to be in the great spiritual centres of the world. The Risen Lord can be part of our life wherever we are. The "where" of the Emmaus story is a nameless road, really any road, every road where we are, any point on the road of life as a child, teenager, young adult, parent or senior citizen. It is anywhere in the world of work, whatever our occupation.

It is anywhere we are personally in doubt, in grief, in joy, in consternation, in worry, in distress. Christ is there with us. That's the "where" of the Emmaus story. The road on which they travel is our road right now and Christ is with us as well.

The first point of the Emmaus story is that the Risen Christ is near to all of us, to every single Christian, because we are all important to Him. As St. Peter says in the second reading we were all ransomed by His very blood.

I think perhaps the big questions we want to ask after hearing this Sunday's Gospel is: ***Why did the disciples not immediately recognize the risen Lord? Had they not heard his voice? Had they not known Jesus well, knew how he looked, talked and walked?***

In the Gospels we have a number of resurrection stories. These begin with the story of the empty tomb. In itself this is not a proof of the resurrection. The absence of his body from the tomb could be explained otherwise. The Gospels go on to tell of a number of appearances of Jesus. These appearances were the primary way the disciples came to know that he had risen from the dead. All these appearance stories stress that Jesus is the same person. This is the reason why he shows his wounds to the Apostles. The wound-marks inflicted during the crucifixion serve to identify him as the same one who died. Yet all stories make it clear that he is somehow changed, and therefore not immediately recognizable. This is a way of making the point that resurrection is not a return to earthly life as before. The raising of Jesus was not like the other restorations to life mentioned in the Bible. Think about the accounts of Jesus raising the widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:11–17) and Jairus's daughter (Luke 8:41–42, 49–56), and the account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead as found in John 11:1–46). Three of them were raised from the dead, and came back to normal life. They went on to live normal lives until they died.

As you know, I lost consciousness and was in a coma for 74 days and nights. I thought I was dead and resurrected by God, so I was named Lazarus Tao Pham. I have come back to normal life and I am living among you. Take the raising of Nain's son, Jairus's daughter, and Lazarus, they returned to ordinary human existence; there is no suggestion that they were glorified, or that they would not have to die again. Or like my story: the raising of Lazarus Tao Pham, I returned to ordinary human existence and now I am living among you. However, I will die one day sooner or later. But the resurrection of Jesus is very different from ours. Jesus, on the other hand, is portrayed as conquering death, as returning immortal and glorified. He has risen to a new life beyond death, a life with God. Even though he was radically transformed, it was Jesus who was seen. He is still who he was but not as he was. Jesus, having been raised from the dead, will never die again. Death has no power over him anymore.

The two Emmaus disciples are called by Jesus “slow of heart to believe all that the prophets had spoken.” Jesus is in fact the very fulfilment of the prophecies of old, appearing and explaining to them the meaning of all these things that they were witnessing.

Yet even this was not enough. The explanation was a prelude and a preparation for what was unmistakable: the breaking of the bread, when finally the disciples were able to see the Lord in their midst, and live in the surety that Christ had indeed risen from the dead, as He had foretold.

In today’s Gospel Jesus walks with his disciples, speaking to them, breaking bread in their presence and then disappearing. It is a mysterious encounter, but also it is clearly the Lord in the midst of his own beloved followers, bringing them new and eternal life. The risen Jesus journeys with us too. We meet a person who walks with us, and talks with us. Even when we walk away from him, Jesus will never abandon us. We have the same means of recognising him, because the Scriptures and the Eucharist are the essential components of our Sunday service.

As the breaking of the bread in this story is the moment when the resurrected one reveals himself by ‘opening their eyes’, so the presence of the Lord Jesus is ‘revealed’ through the eyes of faith in the Eucharist. It is the same Christ who suffered, died and entered into glory who is present to the disciples on the way to Emmaus and to any community celebrating the Eucharist. In the breaking of bread we understand that Jesus was celebrating a Eucharist in their presence, the memorial of Christ’s offering Himself for the life of the world. In the past Jesus had broken bread often enough and distinctly enough that the words and actions were immediately recognized by even those of clouded mind or thought. Do we recognize the Lord in the breaking of bread whenever the Church celebrates the Holy Eucharist? May the Lord open our minds to look beyond the bread we eat, to really see our Saviour and Lord, when we are present and partake of the Eucharist.

I was recently asked if “attending Mass” when it is televised is “just as good” as going to Mass in a church. I said something to the effect that watching a cooking show or a Burger King ad will not satisfy our natural hunger. Just so, televised Mass, while undoubtedly a great blessing and help for many at this time of world crisis, is still not the same as going to Mass at church and receiving Holy Communion.

Jesus continues to live with us in the Eucharist, his disciples recognized the resurrected Jesus in the “breaking of the bread,” which is the Eucharist. Every time we celebrate and share in the Eucharist, we can proclaim that the Lord has been raised and lives among us.

The two disciples' journey did not end at Emmaus. They went back to where they had begun. Their journey took them again to Jerusalem, where they could bear witness that they had seen the risen Lord. Our journey too, like theirs, is meant to end in Jerusalem, but the heavenly Jerusalem! May we learn to prefer nothing to the love of Christ and may He lead us all to everlasting life. Amen.

Happy Easter to you all!

I keep you and your family in my daily prayers.

May the Risen Lord bless you and keep you safe in his providence.

Fr Tao Pham