

Easter 2

Sunday 19th April 2020



Readings:

Acts 2.14a, 22-32

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.

‘You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. For David says concerning him,

“I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;
therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
moreover, my flesh will live in hope.

For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One experience corruption.

You have made known to me the ways of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.”

Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,

“He was not abandoned to Hades,
nor did his flesh experience corruption.”

This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.

Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, ‘Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?’ He asked them,

'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.' Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Reflection

I have, in more normal times, told you of a clergy conference I once attended when we were asked to choose our favourite resurrection appearance and this encounter at Emmaus was the runaway winner. What is it, I wonder, about this event that makes it so dear to so many hearts? Why did it inspire this atmospheric painting, *Supper at Emmaus*, by Caravaggio?



The picture illustrates the moment of revelation, when the two disciples Jesus met on the road, recognise him in the blessing and breaking of the bread. Caravaggio has put a great deal of religious symbolism into his work which may be lost on us today. All the items on the

table have special significance. Critics have pointed out that the fruit is autumnal and so out of season for Easter, but I don't think that need bother us too much. The apple, near the front of the basket, is going rotten, a symbol of the temptation and of the Fall of Man. The coming of Christ is symbolized by the beam of light reflected through the glass vessel onto the tablecloth, a symbol of the Virgin Birth - the light penetrates the glass without breaking it - and the bread is easily recognizable as symbolic of the body of Christ, and the Incarnation. Finally, the sacrifice of Christ is symbolized by the grapes, the source of the wine, which we use in the Eucharist to represent the Blood of Christ. In choosing these items, Caravaggio gives us a whole theology from the Fall to the Cross and redemption.

But, inevitably, the main focus is on the figures. Perhaps the Christ figure looks a little too chubby and bonny for someone who has so recently gone through an agonising death, but that apart there is no denying the drama depicted here. The two men, Cleopas and his friend, sit at table with Jesus, and we also see a third man, probably a servant Caravaggio has invented, but I doubt whether these two humble disciples would have had such a luxury. The servant, if such he is, seems to show little emotion, perhaps simply bemused by this enigmatic stranger his master has brought home.

But the two men, in contrast, are clearly gripped by the wonder of the moment. One has his hands on the arms of his chair, caught in the act of leaping to his feet. The other has flung wide his arms in amazement. But both have their eyes fixed on Jesus, perhaps asking themselves why they had not recognised him before. We don't know the answer; perhaps his resurrection body is so transformed as to make him appear unfamiliar to them; or perhaps they were so wrapped up in their grief, so convinced that Jesus was dead, that they did not really open their eyes and take a good look at their fellow traveller, even when he expounded the scriptures to them, scriptures that actually explained the truth and meaning of the previous few days. It is only in that well-known and comforting gesture of breaking bread that his true identity becomes obvious. And the enormity of the revelation takes their breath away.

That mixture of familiarity and wonder is – or should be – characteristic of every Eucharist. The familiarity of the oft repeated rite is comforting and reassuring, but should not obscure the sacramental and mysterious nature of what we do. We are remembering Christ, commemorating the most significant event in world history since creation itself, our salvation - and that should fill us with joy and thanksgiving and above all with wonder like that we see in Caravaggio's painting. How long has it been since we felt so transformed and uplifted by our experience of the Eucharist – a wonderful Christmas or Easter communion- or perhaps even further back to the first time we received communion. Admittedly, we may come to the altar in a different mood each week, perhaps wrapped up in our own preoccupations, but if we can only come with open hearts and minds to receive the grace of God, he will honour that and fill us with his Spirit.

If absence indeed makes the heart grow fonder, then, as this crisis continues, we are all missing everything that church means to us, the fellowship and sense of community, the opportunity "to pray as well for others as for ourselves," and the exchange of peace – but above all obeying Christ's commandment to "do this in remembrance of me." When we return, perhaps we will all come to the sacraments afresh, recognise him anew in the breaking of the bread, rediscover the wonder of receiving the body and blood of Christ as if for the first time, and so share the overwhelming sense of joy of those disciples at Emmaus. Amen

Prayers

Today's Collect

Living God,
your Son made himself known to his disciples
in the breaking of bread:
open the eyes of our faith,
that we may see him in all his redeeming work;
who is alive and reigns, now and for ever.
Amen

Emmaus Road

We are disappointed and worn down.
Lord, walk with us.
We doubt what we believe.
Lord, teach us.
We need a sign.
Lord, break the bread.
We seek your kingdom.
Lord, fill our hearts with fire.

Nick Burden

A Prayer for God's presence with us at this time

Father, as, at this time, when we are denied fellowship with each other, and the joy of coming together as a family to eat at your table; when we cannot share the bread and wine with you, as did your friends at Emmaus, we pray that you will visit us, by your Spirit, and make your presence known in all our lives. Give us faith to believe that you can sustain us even in this darkest hour; that you will shelter us under the shadow of your wing and keep us safe. Let your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, that we may know again the joy of your salvation and emerge from darkness into light.
Amen

Blessing

May Christ, who out of defeat
Brings new hope and a new future,
Fill you with his new life.
And the blessing of God almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.
Amen