

Easter 3
6/04/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 2:14a, 36 - 41
Psalm 116:1-4,12 - 19
1 Peter 1:17 - 23
Luke 24:13 – 35

Known to them at the breaking of bread

Flannery O'Connor tells of Mrs Turpin, a hard working, upright, church-going farmer's wife, who was accosted by a mentally disturbed teenage girl in a doctor's office. Mrs Turpin had been speaking at length in a superior and demeaning fashion about blacks and white trash, when the girl suddenly hurled a heavy book at her, tried to strangle her, and called her a "wart hog from hell."

Back on her farm, standing at the pigpen, Mrs Turpin is unable to get the girl's words out of her mind. She is outraged at being called a "warthog". She knows she is a good person, far superior to white trash, blacks and lunatics. She reminds God that as well she works hard for her church, and asks: "What did you send me a message like that for?"

But as she stares into the pigpen, she has a "glimpse of a mystery" and begins to absorb some "abysmal life giving knowledge". She has a vision of a parade of souls marching into heaven with white trash, blacks, lunatics and other social outcasts at the front, while at the back are the respectable people like herself, with shocked looks on their faces, having discovered that all their virtues amount to nothing. Mrs Turpin returns to her house with the *Alleluias* of the heaven bound parade ringing in her ears. (*Everything Must Converge pp. 191 – 218, quoted from Migliore*).

Revelation, such as occurred to Mrs Turpin and to the two on the road to Emmaus, is knowledge that is utterly surprising and disturbing. It is not something we work out for ourselves, but comes as a gift. It unveils a mystery that compels momentous decisions about God, the world and ourselves. O'Connor calls this "abysmal knowledge" because it turns our world upside down and creates the sort of change we resist. It shakes us to the core even when its contours are already known to us. On the other hand, our experience as church is that this knowledge is life-giving because it reveals the deepest things we can know, and opens up new possibilities for life.

The story of the two on the road to Emmaus is a polished gem with many facets. The intriguing thing is that when questioned by the stranger the two knew all the facts. Furthermore, when the stranger took them through the stories of Moses and the Prophets, we can assume they had heard them before. But their disappointed hopes for a deliverer combined with their disbelief over the tales from the tomb were barriers to faith. The two had yet to discover in their tradition a deeper understanding of the character and purposes of God. The text says their "eyes were kept them from recognizing" the stranger. The point is the power of disclosure in the revelation that brings faith comes as a gift from outside ourselves. It is not a work of our intelligence or effort. It comes, as the Basis of Union (*para 4*) says in "some strange way" when

Christ reaches out to constitute, rule and renew the disciples as his church.

We don't know what stories from Moses and the Prophets the stranger referred to, but he most likely dwelt on Isaiah's poems about the suffering servant who, though despised by many, was raised up by God. The strange word about the necessity of suffering may have come in here. It refers to God's willingness to become totally involved with us, and says something about how God is both present and hidden in suffering, contradicting Hebrew and Greek ideas of God and God's anointed one.

It is certain the stranger referred to Moses and the Exodus and showed them how God heeded the suffering of their ancestors and was known to them in the event of liberation. It is possible he reminded them how God called Abraham and Sarah, who were as good as dead, to be the seed of a whole new people through whom God would bless the world with new possibilities of life. It is likely that he spoke about Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones, and showed how the Spirit of God worked to bring new life to a despairing people lost in exile. All of these refer to God the living God, whose creative power transcends everything we know about life and death. But they still did not see.

At Emmaus, he was going on. This is typical of the Resurrection narratives. Jesus went before them into Galilee, into the world. But he also heeded their request to stay, and it was his gesture in breaking the bread that opened their eyes. Sometimes at the Eucharist we pray: "Be present among us, O Lord, as once among your disciples, and make yourself known even to us at the breaking of bread." The remembering of the Church is not simply the recalling of a past event, but a prayer for its real and effective presence to be with us now. At Emmaus this enlivening memory encountered them through the same trigger as Thomas experienced - the symbols of his self-giving. In the breaking of the bread the stranger's gift revealed that Resurrection is not so much the story of a revived corpse. It is the Living God's new way of demonstrating that the reign of God was fulfilled in Jesus' complete self-giving. This is saving knowledge. It undoes our view of the world and allows us to cross a threshold and understand life from God's point of view.

The two companions made that move. Being able to understand the breaking of bread meant they could now grasp the truth behind the stories from the Tomb. And with fire in their hearts they saw that it is the Risen Christ who illuminates the Hebrew Scriptures. Everything that happens here shows that it is Easter, which makes sense of the divine purpose for humanity. That is why the Resurrection becomes fundamental to the life of the church, and indeed the world. That is why in our Congregation's Mission Vision and Goals says:

In Jesus Christ, God entered fully into our humanity to raise us up to new life. Therefore we are called

- * to offer self-giving love in the world**
- * to exercise a prophetic ministry that challenges our own lives as well as others**
- * to work for justice, supporting the most vulnerable in our society**
- * to work for reconciliation, human development, and the renewal of the face of the earth.**

Once they could see, he vanished. Don't underestimate the meaning here. When God is revealed, God remains God: paradoxically disclosed to us, yet hidden and out of reach. God is known and yet never ceases to be mystery: more than what mortals can think or say. The particular mystery of Christian faith is that God is hidden in the form of one who suffers. The Resurrection is not the apotheosis of an impressive Emperor. It is God's lifting up to life of one who was discarded, for whom there was no hope of anything in this world or the next.

Once seen, Resurrection faith is not something people can stay silent about. For the two companions the impact led to a complete turn around. They had to face the "abysmal knowledge" that they had completely misunderstood the events in Jerusalem, and were oblivious to deeper meaning of their faith. And they had to own the faithlessness of their journey to Emmaus and their slowness to believe. But beyond this, the experience was positive. Life and hope replaced despondency and despair. In the dark, but lit up by the light of faith, they retraced their steps and were united with a lively community of hope, soon to be confirmed in their faith and empowered by the Spirit to spread the news.

The Road to Emmaus is not on any map. It is found wherever the companions of Jesus have become self focussed and lost their direction and sense of meaning. It is where the church forgets the place and purpose of the Word and Sacraments and allows itself to be captured by meaninglessness and despair. It is wherever the disciples have closed the doors of their hearts and their houses and are no longer open to the gift of the Stranger.

The Good News is that it is to just such people that the Risen Christ comes. In "some strange way" he discloses himself, through memory nurtured by the Word, fed by the Sacraments and empowered by life-giving Spirit. Paradoxically the Road to Emmaus is both threatening and life-giving. Here we may encounter the familiar stranger we long to see. But the price of meeting him is that everything we know may be completely overturned, and we may set out on a new journey of faith and life. This may be threatening. But overwhelming joy is the consequence of his gift because his mysterious presence is the sign that God is for us in ways that we can hardly imagine. In this knowledge we are safe to set out on new paths, for we know he has gone before, and he travels with us, and continues to make himself known to us in the breaking of bread.

Thanks be to God. Amen.