

Easter 3
10/04/2005

Mark the Evangelist

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

At the end of the day...

Luke's account of the journey to Emmaus is one of the most beautiful stories in the New Testament, and probably should just be read. And yet it deserves to be expounded. The story takes place on the first day of the week - the day of creation when God commenced giving life to the world. This is a sign that the power at work in the beginning is at work on the day of resurrection. This is the day the Lord has made. It is no accident this has become the day of celebration of the Christian community.

The two on the road are downcast. The women's story of angels and an empty tomb made no sense and they are confused. The Stranger rebukes them for their slowness to believe - yet they are not denied his gift. All who doubt and feel far from God can take heart here, because the new life given us is not restricted to those who are the first to the scene or the closest to the action. It comes even to those who are wandering off, lost in a slough of despond.

The Stranger takes the two on a journey of scriptural reinterpretation in which the conventional character and mission of the long expected Messiah is set aside. He shows them that the Cross and Resurrection is the lens through which the role of the Anointed One is to be discerned, according to the scriptures. As Protestants who are committed to the Word, it is good to see that the two knew the scriptures. The reinterpretation didn't get them across the threshold of faith, but something had begun to ignite within them.

At the door to the Inn the Stranger makes to go on. It is his character to go on; that is why he was not in Jerusalem, but on the road with them. They compel him to join their meal. There is good news here. He who intends to go on, and is in fact beyond our grasp, allows himself to be constrained by us. He heeds our prayer and stays with us - to feed us and gift us with life.

At table the actions of the guest recall the feeding of the crowd with the loaves and the fishes, and Jesus' actions at the last supper. Here the stranger becomes familiar. In the face of Jesus of Nazareth they behold the face of God, turned towards the world in mercy. We cannot underestimate the meaning of the moment of recognition and his subsequent disappearance. He gave himself to them as he did to Mary in the garden, but they cannot hold him. His vanishing is a declaration that he who allowed himself to be constrained to stay with them, is yet free from all the constraints and limits we know. He is gifted with a new kind of life over which death, destruction and human control have no dominion. This new life he imparts to them; for them love has come again. Their hasty return to Jerusalem was a seven-mile walk in darkness, but it was illuminated by the new light and energy of faith. Not by their own heroic efforts did they do this. The power to change came from outside themselves, and it led them into fellowship where they rejoiced to share their news.

The Journey to Emmaus shows us in picturesque detail that, in spite of ongoing despair

and disbelief on our part, the Familiar Stranger comes to meet us, without our asking, to bring us life and hope and faith. This story shows that, in resurrection as in death on the cross, the mission of Jesus of Nazareth is the same: to embody amongst us the mercy of God. He made available to all the assurance of God's absolute acceptance of us even in our alienation, darkness, pain and despair. The Road to Emmaus is like a window opened into heaven which reveals in bright colours the face of Jesus Christ, shining to set the world ablaze with the freedom and energy of God.

What are we to make of this story in North Melbourne in the year of grace 2005? Firstly, this experience reveals that the Familiar Stranger leads the church towards two sources of sustenance for its life - the Scriptures and the Breaking of the Bread. Luke is very clear that Jesus is present through these two channels. Protestants have tended to emphasize the Word and Catholics the Sacrament, but the two belong together and should be kept together when the Christian community gathers for prayer.

Secondly we may find ourselves in this story. We know of journeys into darkness and times of coldness of heart. Like the two on the road we can find ourselves thinking we have simply got involved with one more failed attempt to do something meaningful in the world. Death, in the form of disappointed expectations and dashed hopes is more familiar to us, whereas life is the stranger we find hard to recognise.

Thirdly, every few years we have a New Church Life survey. Valuable though these are I detest the way we allow ourselves to become enslaved to the opinion that because statistics show the church is declining therefore it will die. It was interesting to hear that during the pontificate of John Paul II the Catholic Church had grown by 25%, although more in some parts of the world than our own. We know there is a bigger picture in which there is a cultural assault on our ways of understanding life and faith. We know well how in the last 2 or 3 centuries deep changes have taken place in the Western tradition to the point where it is commonly believed that, in a world like ours, faith is no longer possible. And yet his funeral was marked by the presence of people from every part of the world, and leaders of numerous other traditions of faith. If we find ourselves tempted to feel like the two, groping along as the candle of hope burns lower, it is good to remember the word from today suggests God does not cease to work just because our ways of understanding have changed. At a time when the two on the road were trapped in a cultural rut they were encountered by a life that was recognizably the same as theirs, and yet so radically different that their whole mood and direction was turned around. Because of this they exchanged their alienated slough of despond for joyful community with others who, on the first day of the week, had begun a new way of life. They celebrated the feast of the Resurrection, a feast of resistance that knows about death, but laughs in its face.

Finally, the encounter on the road to Emmaus occurred at the end of the day. We use this phrase "at the end of the day" to say that, compared with where we are at present, we want things to fall into place. At the end of the day we want life to be organised out of chaos, we want to find ourselves in a position where things have meaning and value. "Stay with us, the day is nearly ended". The end of the day was a decisive moment in this story when it became clear that in his conversation about the scriptures he was showing them where to find a new sense of value and meaning for their lives. And in allowing himself to be prevailed upon to stay with them, he entered into share a meal that became a living sign of shared need and shared love. At the end of the day love came again for them, and they were filled in ways they could hardly anticipate.

At the end of the day... It seems to us that we are together on a dark road that leads

away from broken hopes and dreams then, on the basis of this story, it is just then that we should be alert. It is at this very point that, in some strange way, through word, sacrament and unexpected guest, Christ comes to his people to inflame their hearts, to make himself known, and to gift them with the community creating, energizing power of life.