

Easter 3
8/05/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 2:14a, 36 – 41

Psalm 116

1 Peter 1:17 - 23

Luke 24:13 - 35

The road to Emmaus

The Road to Emmaus is a polished gem of a story, which it seems almost blasphemous to do other than to listen to and savour the beauty of its message. Like all the resurrection appearances it comes at the end of the Gospel, but this does not mean this is just one more event in Jesus' history. The resurrection is the basis for the whole of the New Testament and without it the Gospel would not have been written. The conviction that the crucified Jesus was alive in a new and more powerful Spirit filled fashion went hand in hand with confessing faith in him and ongoing experiences of transformation in community life.

Readers of Luke's account of the road to Emmaus come to it knowing that Jesus has already risen. What they discover is the story of two travellers who have listened to the women, heard all of the news and are conversant with the scriptures, yet remain downcast and disbelieving, their memory clouded by the darkness of Good Friday. Their light has gone out. They have turned their back on Jerusalem the scene of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection. For them the longed for mighty deliverer did not emerge, there had been no new revelation of God in that dark town.

On the road to Emmaus something prevented them from recognizing the stranger who shared their journey (24:16) but afterwards their eyes were opened (24:31). They were able to read their history past and present, with new eyes, and they were able to recognise the familiar stranger who was their companion. Two things made the difference. Firstly their companion highlighted the necessity of the Messiah's suffering, as found in the Jewish Scriptures. Through the focal point of the Jesus' suffering and death they came to a fresh reading of the long story of God's purposes for the world, so that memory and hope were transformed and their darkness began to dissipate.

There is a paradox here. The resurrected Jesus acted as a critical interpreter to explain the message of the well-known ancient texts so that the trial before Herod and Pilate, the suffering of the cross, and the women's witness were read against the bigger screen of God's promises to Moses and the prophets. Scripture and the news of Easter Day came alive in resurrection light!

The second action that changed things was that Jesus broke bread with the two companions. We hardly need to be told that this gesture is a reminder of the last supper and the feeding of the multitude. The sacramental acts of a bible study followed by a meal in the Emmaus Café brought them to new faith in what they knew. But this did not come automatically, or mechanically. Their gesture of hospitality towards a stranger returned them an unexpected gift that ended their journey of despair and empowered them for a whole new life. That the change was a gift is made clear in the text, which is in the passive voice: *then their eyes were opened* (v 31). When they returned to Jerusalem they reported: *he had been made know to them in the breaking of bread* (v 35). In the concluding scene the gathered friends confirm the witness of the women: Jesus is indeed risen! The whole community have been led beyond grief, doubt and fear to see that God was present in the darkness of the Cross, and continues to be their companion on the way.

Dan Migliore says our attempts to interpret the resurrection have to avoid two extremes: the attempt to demonstrate the resurrection by scientific or historical research or the reduction of the event to a mere change of mind by the disciples (Migliore, *Faith Seeking*... p 191-2). The truth of the resurrection can't be captured within the limits knowledge as we know them, but paradoxically it is accounted for within those parameters, which is why it offers us hope for living and hope for the life of the world.

Faith in the Resurrection is just that: faith. And it means certain things. It means that God is faithful to the promises long voiced by Moses and the prophets whose words of hope have been in the world for ages, and have not come from nowhere.

Christ is risen is a confession that means the one we know of as Jesus who was crucified has been raised up to a new form of life. This is a statement that is profoundly affirming of human life. Because he has been exalted by God all of humanity had been deemed worthy of new respect.

According the Gospel of John, the risen Christ breathes the Holy Spirit on his disciples (20:22). That Christ is risen means the Spirit gives again to us the life that Christ gave once and for all, joining us in a Spirit filled community of new life.

Flowing from the above we affirm the Risen Christ created a community of faith, the church: a sign of hope for the world because it is built on reconciliation with God and with one another.

The New Testament Scholar NT Wright says: "*Christ is risen is political dynamite*" because it challenges all worldly principalities and powers. (quoted Migliore, p 195). That Christ is risen means he is above Kings and Emperors. Because he is risen as the crucified one, it means the tyrannical claims and violent actions of unjust rulers, and all institutionalised forms of sin and death have been radically called into question. Liberation theologians found great strength in this understanding resurrection because it is the sign that the God of life opposes all idols of death, and it proclaims the triumph of Love over all injustice and violence. As such the resurrection is an event that gives all victims of politics and history a new and lasting hope (Sobrinho).

There is a message for us here in this week of macabre celebrations over the death of Osama bin Laden. The disciples of the Risen One know the cross and resurrection are inseparable events, and as such are sacramental signs that express the efficacy and solidarity of God's love towards victims. That is why thoughtful Christians have been unable to rejoice over the troubling events of this week because murder, coercive violence and the destruction of life robs human life of dignity, and in no way reflects the justice of God who in Christ acquits the guilty, and gives people their life back. It has diminished our nation that our leaders, committed to the rejection of capital punishment in Australia, condone such action abroad and now concur with an act of assassination and personal obliteration that will most likely provoke more violence and waste of life. In the words of a Pax Christi statement by Wes Campbell:
We pray that the God of peace may send the Spirit of new life in this time of anguish. And we commit ourselves to building bridges of communication and shared life with those who differ from us.

Finally, the resurrection has a cosmic dimension, expressed by Jurgen Moltmann as the beginning of God's new world. St Paul says the cosmos groans to be released from its bondage to the reign of death understood as separation from God, and all forms of institutionalised death. On Easter morning the first glimmers of the dawn of God's new creation appear to illuminate the end to which all life in the world is moving. To believe in the resurrection of Christ is to believe not only that God will triumph, but that violent death, tragic death, and separation from God, will one day be no more. Christ is risen is an astonishing statement. One that is good news indeed, but also one that challenges us to throw off the old ways, and commit to live a new life.

Let us pray:

God of justice and mercy,

Osama bin Laden is dead. For many this news has brought relief and the hope that violence and terror will cease. For others it has stirred feelings of hatred and revenge. Forgive us for refusing peace and allowing our hearts to go along with hatred, violence, prejudice and revenge.

Your love knows no bounds and your peace passes all understanding. Your justice sets us right, challenges our wrongdoing and restores our humanity, offering us hope of forgiveness and change.

Grant that we may be strong to embrace your mercy and justice in the world you have given us. May we be bold in recommitting ourselves to build bridges with those who differ from us.

We pray in the name of Christ, who gave his life, that all may live and know the power of your love for the world, and live in fullness of life.

Amen
