

Today's Gospel begins with a journey. In the afternoon of that first Easter, we encounter the two disciples on the road out of Jerusalem. Unlike the Women who had followed Jesus to the cross and the Apostles who were remaining in Jerusalem, these figures are heading for the hills, returning perhaps to their former lives. And what is more curious is that they have clearly heard reports of the empty tomb, but have still opted to leave. This suggests that they had failed to believe that Jesus would rise from the dead.

What should we conclude from this?

I would suggest that we can reasonably conclude that the disciples lacked true faith in Christ. They clearly admired Him, considering Him a great prophet. They even had hopes, "that he would be the one to set Israel free." (Luke 24:21) They could not comprehend or accept however, that He could be the Messiah and yet endure the ignominy of a death of the cross. In other words, they did not truly believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

We are reminded here, of the parable of the Sower and the Seed, "As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away." (Matthew 13:20-21)

Like the seed that fell on rocky ground, the faith of our two disciples flourished when everything was going well, when Jesus was, "...mighty in deed and word before God and all the people." (Luke 24:19) Their faith shrivelled however when confronted by the torments of the crucifixion, and the apparent finality of the tomb.

And so, we encounter our tragic duo, their hopes in tatters behind them and in front of them, nothing but disillusionment and hopelessness. They are on a road that is leading nowhere.

Pope Benedict acknowledges that many today are struggling to experience Easter joy;

This drama of the disciples of Emmaus appears like a reflection of the situation of many Christians of our time: it seems that the hope of faith has failed. Faith itself enters a crisis because of negative experiences that make us feel abandoned and betrayed even by the Lord. But this road to Emmaus on which we walk can become the way of a purification and maturation of our belief in God.” (1)

While the disciples journey had the least promising of beginnings, it was destined to be the most meaningful of their lives. This journey would lead them out of the darkness of despair, into the light of Resurrection faith.

It is at this moment, when all hope seemed lost, that a mysterious stranger joins them on the road. They do not recognise Him, and He chooses not to reveal Himself. Why is this? Why does Jesus not simply declare Himself?

The reason I would suggest is that for the disciples to recognise Jesus in His Resurrected form, they must first come to know who He truly is and believe in Him. In other words, their eyes and their ears must be opened. We are reminded here, of the words of St. Paul in the end of the Acts of the Apostles;

The Holy Spirit was right in saying... You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn and I would heal them. (Acts 28: 25-27)

Faith is necessary! And so, our mysterious stranger begins by admonishing them for their poor faith, “You foolish men! So slow to believe the full message of the prophets!” (Luke 24:25). He then leads them on a journey through scripture. A journey that reveals who Jesus is, and why He died as He did. A journey that will lead them to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. (Romans 1:4)

Pope Benedict describes this experience thus, “The meaning of all things, of the Law, of the Prophets and of the Psalms, suddenly dawns on them and becomes clear to their eyes.”⁽²⁾ “His words make the hearts of the disciples “burn” within them, drawing them out of the darkness of sorrow and despair, and awakening in them a desire to remain with Him: “Stay with us, Lord,”⁽³⁾ they beseech Him.

The disciples had been lost in the darkness of despair but Jesus, ‘The Good Shepherd,’ (John 10) had come in search of His lost sheep. And it is by gradually revealing Himself to them, that He steadily leads them home.

It is at this auspicious moment, when the disciples have come to the point of recognising that Jesus is the fulfilment of the promise, that the mysterious stranger reveals Himself to them;

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 recognised him; and he vanished from their sight. (Luke 24:29-31)

The presence of Jesus, revealed first through the word and then in the breaking of the bread, enabled the disciples to recognise the Lord.⁽⁴⁾ They had asked that He stay with them and in response, through the Eucharist, Jesus created a way of staying “in” them. Creating a profound communion of mutual abiding,⁽⁵⁾ “Abide in me, and I in you.” (John 15:4)

What was true then is true today, and it will continue to be true until the end of the Age, “The Eucharist is a mystery of presence, the perfect fulfilment of Jesus’ promise to remain with us until the end of the world.”⁽⁶⁾ In the Eucharist the Risen Lord has become our travelling companion on our journey. He kindles the warmth of faith and hope in our hearts, and breaks for us the bread of eternal life.⁽⁷⁾

Having been given so great a gift, let us join our voices in thanksgiving and say, “O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.” (Psalm 107:1)

Notes

- (1) Benedict xvi, Regina Caeli, 06/04/2008
- (2) Benedict xvi, General Audience, 11/04/2012
- (3) John Paul II, Mane Nobiscum Domine, 07/10/2004, no.12
- (4) Benedict xvi, General Audience, 11/04/2012
- (5) John Paul II, Mane Nobiscum Domine, 07/10/2004, no.19
- (6) John Paul II, Mane Nobiscum Domine, 07/10/2004, no.16
- (7) Benedict xvi, Regina Caeli, 06/04/2008