

Third Sunday of Easter

26th April 2020

I was struck by a simple sentence in today's Gospel from Luke. It's the '*Road to Emmaus*' which recalls two disciples walking from Jerusalem. They are talking about the death of Jesus and the rumours concerning the empty tomb. In the middle of their conversation they encounter a stranger on the road. The unknown traveller joins them for the rest of their journey and begins to unpack the scriptures, explaining them clearly. As the day comes to an end the two companions invite the man to rest and eat with them. Before the meal begins the stranger breaks and blesses the bread and immediately as he does so the other two recognise who their guest is – Jesus, the Lord!



The line that struck me from this Gospel passage is near the beginning.

'They [The two disciples] stopped short, their faces downcast.' (Lk 24:17b)

That line for me is heartbreaking because it resonates with the reality, we are all facing at this moment in time. This is the season of Easter and yet it is a season that, at the present moment, seems lost and hidden away. The momentous days of the Easter Triduum culminating in *the* Mass of the whole year, The Easter Vigil, seems to have come and gone like a thief in the night. Rather than spiritual joy at the Resurrection there is a downcast atmosphere because of the suffering and death that Covid-19 is causing. Days merge into one another, irritations fester and grow, some folk battle with boredom while others cope with stress and anxiety. Life has stopped short and Easter seems to have been a non-event.

Yet for those two disciples trudging along that road, a road made all the more arduous because of their downcast hearts and troubled spirits, they encounter hope. Real Hope. Hope, not as in a psychological state of mind to assist getting through a 'bad patch' but hope as in a real person. The person of Jesus Christ. The travellers have been crushed by the death of the Lord, they are in a state of confusion over hearing about an empty tomb and feel like outcasts because people recognise them as followers of the dead 'Teacher from Nazareth'. Life has stopped short and all that they held to be true seems false, pointless and empty. However, it is in the experience of meeting Jesus on the road that transformation takes place and hope becomes real. It is in the very encounter of listening to the Lord and talking with him that hope springs forth. It is in the very presence of Christ, especially at the breaking of bread, that they see the face of hope.

When we see and hear the figures in regards to how many people have died because of the Coronavirus it is tragic. The numbers are so big that it is easy to become complacent and forget that behind the daily total of deaths is an individual, a life, a family, a story. Today, living in this pandemic, we are walking in the footsteps of those two downcast disciples. Footsteps that are sad and confused about life but footsteps that will soon be joined by another. Another who we know will make the journey lighter and bring encouragement because that 'other' is our hope, he is Jesus Our Lord.



There is a great sermon I came across the other day from one of the early church Fathers that beautifully illustrates the power of hope found in the Lord, especially at this time when the death toll due to Covid-19 is so high.

'This [The Cross] was the tree on which Christ, like a king on a chariot, destroyed the devil, the Lord of death, and freed the human race from his tyranny. This was the tree upon which the Lord, like a brave warrior wounded in his hands, feet and side, healed the wounds of sin that the evil serpent had inflicted on our nature. A tree once caused our death, but now a tree brings life.'

St. Theodore the Studite

Easter for us as Catholics is not a symbolic time but a season when we remember the concrete reality that Jesus has risen from the dead. Death has no more power over us because Jesus has destroyed it. It does not take away the sadness and grief when someone dies but the hope that Our Lord has given us through the Resurrection lets us know that for the faithful follower there is more to come.

I've just finished reading a book called '*A Time To Die: Monks on the Threshold of Eternal Life.*' The author, Nicolas Diat, travelled around various monasteries in France asking monks about death. How they understand it, live with it and deal with it. One of the last monastic communities that Diat visited was The Grande Chartreuse Monastery, home to one of the strictest monastic orders of the Catholic Church – the Carthusians. He received this wisdom from one of the monk's there called Dom Innocent.

"You had asked me if I were waiting for death. I did not say yes right away, for a basically obvious reason: it is not the door I am waiting for, but what is on the other side of the door. I am not waiting for death, but for Life."

Dom Innocent is a man who has walked down the Emmaus road like all of us. He has known, as a human being, the ups and downs of life, the struggles and tragedies, the joys and downcast days. What has sustained him on the road of life is the same person who caused the two disciples in the Gospel to say:

'Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us.' (Lk 24:32)

The same traveller whose encounter changed them for the better; the same stranger who transformed their darkness into the light; the same guest who revealed in the breaking of bread the presence of the Risen Lord.

For myself I want to continue to grow in faith, and hope, and love, each day. I want to make that Carthusian monks prayer my own prayer. The prayer that does not fear the door that we all must pass through one day but to focus and desire the person beyond the door – Jesus, my Lord and my God. Brothers and Sisters never give up, no matter how bleak life may seem and always have faith in the Risen Lord who will never abandon us if our hearts are set on him for all time.

I've asked John Hughes, our webmaster, to put a new category on the website entitled '*Requiescat in Pace*'. This will be for those who have died recently and we will put their names in this section, asking people to pray for their souls and the families who are in mourning them. The names will be deleted at the start of each month.

God Bless and keep praying

Fr. O'Brien