

## Homily – Third Sunday of Easter, 26 April 2020

There has been much debate recently about the respective merits and dangers of reopening our churches, and the associated, but separate question of reinstating public Masses. This is a sensitive issue, and requires that we be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.. whilst also being open to the advice that we are receiving from our respective governments and bishops' conferences. We are being well served by live-streamed Masses, which are such a consolation for us. Thanks to modern technology, we can travel to Mass (virtually, of course!) on the other side of the world, with a few clicks of the mouse or computer keypad. Parishioners take delight, indeed a certain pride, in declaring that they have 'been to Mass with the Holy Father in St. Peter's', or have 'visited St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, where Cardinal Timothy Dolan was presiding', or 'visit the shrine of Our Lady of Knock for Mass', or even travel along the A96 to Aberdeen, to join Bishop Hugh for the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice!

These are wonderful occasions for us to reaffirm our faith, and to 'live' that faith through the Mass. However.. we long for more! We long for that of which we are deprived. We long for the Eucharist, for Christ Himself, who is "really, truly, and substantially present" in His Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity in the Blessed Sacrament, according to the 13th session of the Council of Trent (1551). During this lockdown, we have had to forego many different things in our daily lives that we perhaps take for granted. For us, as Catholics, the deprivation of Holy Communion is certainly no small matter. We are like those weary Israelites, wandering through the desert, starved of what they most desire. They were satiated of their hunger with the Manna from Heaven; unlike them, however, we still have to wait before we can consume the Bread of Life.

Over the last three weeks, the Risen Bread of Life, Jesus the Christ, has appeared to those closest to Him. St. Matthew's account of that Easter Sunday morning tells us of Jesus' encounter with Mary of Magdala, and the other Mary; last week's Gospel reminded us of His appearance to the Apostles in the upper room; today, the circle is further widened. Two men are walking despondently towards the village of Emmaus, "their faces downcast". Why are they forlorn? Because, as they recount, "our chief priests and our leaders handed him [Jesus] over to be sentenced to death, and had him crucified. Our own hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free." These men are not Apostles. We know very little about them. St. Luke tells us the name of the one who is speaking; he is called Cleopas. Is this the husband of Mary, "the wife of Clopas", who stood next to Jesus' own mother at the foot of the Cross? It is a possibility – although Cleopas is a Greek name, contracted from Cleopatros ('the glory of the father'), while Clopas, or Cleophas, is an Aramaic name, the same as Alphaeus. It is clear that they are close disciples. Look at what Cleopas says: "some women *from our group* have astounded us: they went to the tomb in the early morning". These men are part of the same company of disciples as Mary of Magdala and the other women, who saw the angels at the empty tomb. Whoever these men actually were, their identities are less important than their reactions to the stranger who joins them on the road.

These men have followed Jesus; they have listened to His teachings; they will have heard, or at least will have been familiar with, His prophecy of death at the hands of the chief priests and scribes in Jerusalem. Yet, like the Apostles in the Upper Room, they fail to understand. They fail to recognise the stranger walking in their midst. Hence the disparaging comments of their new-found travelling companion: "You foolish men! So slow to believe the full message of the prophets!" They may be foolish, but they are also exceedingly privileged: to receive a lesson in Holy Scripture, to have the word of God broken open and explained to them, by the Word of God Himself, standing in front of them.

This is the first step in our own transformation in and by Christ: understanding who He really is, realising that the Old Testament points towards Him, recognising that He is the longed-for Messiah spoken by the prophets; referred to in the book of psalms, the liturgical song-book used in the Temple; destined to gather together the tribes of the People of Israel, and to free them from the captivity of their oppressors; to lead them to the Kingdom of God. Each time we participate in the celebration of Holy Mass, we should have this same encounter, this same understanding: Holy Scripture tells us about God, and our relationship with Him, and points towards the coming of His Son, the Anointed One (*Christos*). Our hearts should “burn within us” to know more about this Messiah, to encounter Him in a real way. Just as the two disciples press their travelling companion to stay with them, so we too should be hungry for more.

The ‘Table of the Word’, to paraphrase St. Thomas à Kempis, leads us to the ‘Table of the Eucharist’. Understanding leads to recognition, acceptance, and participation. The bread that is broken for us upon the altar during the Mass is the Pierced One whose body was broken for us upon the cross.

The early seventeenth-century Milanese artist Caravaggio captures perfectly these elements of understanding and recognition in his famous painting *The Supper at Emmaus* (1601), now located in the National Gallery in London. Through the use of extreme foreshortening and perspective, we are ‘drawn in’ to the supper, as if fellow diners, just as we are drawn in to the Eucharist. The gestures of the figure on the right are significant – both hands are stretched out, as if to indicate surprise and wonder. His outstretched arms also form the shape of the cross, in recognition of the identity of this guest. A folded napkin sticks out of his pocket, recalling the folded grave clothes left in the empty tomb. On his jacket is a shell, the symbol of the pilgrim. This man represents each one of us, on our earthly pilgrimage through life. Jesus puts out his hand in invitation, to welcome us to the banquet, to eat with Him, and to ‘eat Him’, to consume the Bread of Life. We are drawn in, and are supported by Him, and by our fellow diners, by the other members of our worshipping faith community, who offer us solidarity through their prayers and presence. This is a meal like no other – it is here, at this high point of the Mass, that we come closest to Jesus. This is our most intimate encounter. We are literally in union with Him, we commune with Him in a privileged, unique way: it is an encounter of Communion with the One who gives His very self to us and for us, in order to nourish us spiritually, to console us, and to strengthen us on our way. In receiving Him, we seek to imitate Him, to be transformed by and in Him, to become more Christ-like.

Pope Francis summarises this intimate encounter of Word and Sacrament in a beautifully succinct way:

“Through the intercession of Most Holy Mary, let us pray that every Christian, in reliving the experience of the disciples of Emmaus, especially at Sunday Mass, may rediscover the grace of the transforming encounter with the Lord, with the Risen Lord, who is with us always. There is always a Word of God that gives us guidance after we slip; and through our weariness and disappointments there is always a Bread that is broken that keeps us going on the journey.”  
(St. Peter’s Square, 4 May 2014)