

Sermon for First after Easter, 2021

Wisdom 2:23 & 3:1-9. Hebrews 2:9-15. Psalm 16: 9-12.
Luke 24:13-35.

The Collect: Almighty Father, who has given thine only Son to die for our sins, and to rise again for our justification: grant us so perfectly, and without any doubt, to believe in his resurrection, that in thy sight our faith may never be reproved; through the same Jesus Christ, to whom with thee an the Holy Spirit, be all honour and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Luke 24:31 ‘And their eyes were opened and they recognised him; and he vanished out of their sight.’

Have you ever walked along a road and caught a glimpse of someone, then lost sight of them in an instant? If it’s a busy shopping street, or a crowd at an event, that’s quite easy to do. But, if you have been talking to them over the table, it’s more like a magic trick for them to suddenly disappear. In 1862 a scientist called John Pepper demonstrated how to produce a ‘ghost’ on stage with the use of a mirror and lighting effects. Nowadays, a similar technique is used to conjure up dead celebrities in order to sing duets with them.

In the post-crucifixion account the disciples, both women and men, had been to the garden tomb to see for themselves that it was now empty. Jesus’ body had gone. Angels had explained that Jesus had risen from the dead, as He said He would. Now, two disciples, one being Cleopas, were making their way to Emmaus, maybe a three or four hour walk. It is possible, according to ancient Orthodox sources, that the other disciple was his wife, Mary, who had been at the foot of the cross, and may have carried the myrrh to anoint the body. Cleopas could have been the brother of Joseph, and therefore Mary was Jesus’ aunt. So, it is all the more strange that neither of them had recognised the ‘stranger’ who had walked, talked, and eaten with them in the last few hours.

However, Jesus was not an illusion. In Lk 24:31 ‘their eyes were opened and they recognised him; and he vanished out of their sight.’ Significantly, this recognition came when He gave them the blessed bread. You cannot eat an illusion! An interaction has taken place. He gave, they received. This produced a reaction. There was a cause and effect. We can meditate on the words of St Luke, and reasonably conclude that there was something they saw in Jesus’ action of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving of bread that evoked a memory of having seen Him do this previously. Flashbacks are not unusual, and when combined with trauma, have a lasting effect (as in Post-traumatic Stress Disorder). But, unlike the latter, this glimpse of the reality of Christ in His sacrament was momentary; powerful, but momentary. It was also overwhelmingly positive. It empowered and prompted them to abandon the safety of the overnight lodgings and to go back to share the event with the eleven apostles in Jerusalem.

We have all been living through an unprecedented time of uncertainty. The epidemic has left many sick and dead people in its wake. The rest of the world is still being affected, even to a greater degree than we are in this country. I know that there has been a spirit of fear among people, including Christians. This has provoked anxiety in various forms. It has kept people away from others, and government regulations have restricted the size of assemblies. But, after several months of saying Mass at home, it became possible for us to meet at our beautiful Chapel once again. We are probably all protected by at least one dose of a very effective vaccine, and by the simple precautions we take. We are not afraid.

The early disciples were afraid! They had cause to be, as associates of a man who might have caused an insurrection. Their lives were in danger from the Roman authorities, and from agents of the Sanhedrin. Jesus' courage exceeded theirs; even to the point of a cruel death which He saw coming. But now, in the strength of his visitation to them manifest as a Spiritual body who could manipulate (and consume) bread (and fish), Jesus had imparted some of His power to them. His Body could touch them, and strengthen them. Their fear could be assuaged.

Brothers and Sisters, do not be afraid. The Lord is here to strengthen us. We are here to share His strength with one another. We recognise Him in the breaking of bread. We tell others that He not only appeared to the early disciples, but to us too. We are His agents sent to reach out to others who live in fear, whatever the cause of that might be. Let us be prepared to do as Hebrews tells us in (2:12) 'I will proclaim thy name to my brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will praise thee.' Christ died and rose for you. Rise and live for Him.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.