

The Third Sunday of Easter: Gospel Reading and Reflection

Alleluia, alleluia! I am the first, and the last, and the living one:
I was dead, and behold I am alive for evermore. **Alleluia!**

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to St Luke.

Glory to you, O Lord!

On that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.' Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' 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 recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ!

'Praise to Christ'? Can we still sing praise to Christ? Praise in this strange Eastertide, when so many are isolated at home; when we cannot visit our families; when fear is abroad; when people we know are hospitalised or even dying from an indiscriminate virus? Praise to Christ, when we can no longer gather around his table to share in his Body and Blood?

Things are simply *not normal*. Like many of us, I emerge once a day for my government-approved daily exercise – usually a walk, in this beautiful weather, around Green Lane or the old Roundway Hospital. There are other exercisers abroad too, whom we greet, but also keep our distance from. But if some stranger transgressed that two-metre limit and came right up and started chatting, we might get fearful and suspicious. For these are not normal times.

When, on the road to Emmaus, a stranger approached Cleopas and his companion and asked what they were talking about, times were not normal for them either. There was sadness, fearfulness, the destruction of their hopes and dreams – and then some fantastic stories about their friend Jesus being seen alive after his cruel death. All wildly disorientating. If only this crisis, this crucifixion, if only this virus had not occurred, and we could revert to the blessed normality of the past year, to the presence and teaching and encouragement of our friend and leader. If only we could bask again in the hope he gave us for a world liberated and renewed ...

Then the stranger speaks. He speaks from the scriptures, but he speaks also about Jesus. His words sparkle, and their hearts burn within them, as things begin mysteriously to make sense. 'Stay with us' they say to him, as he makes to walk on. Stay with us, tell us more, show us truth, and meaning, and direction. For isn't that why we still listen, why we come to church, why we wrestle with the strange stories and poems and visions of the Bible?

But words are not all, neither the words of scripture nor those of the strange companion. At the table, words are superseded by *action*: by the simple action of breaking bread, so characteristic of their friend Jesus. The action opens their eyes, and the stranger *is* their friend, their friend alive.

That breaking of bread was such a familiar ritual for Cleopas and his companion, as it is for us. But a ritual also *mysterious* – as again for us. The host at the table can be recognised, but he cannot be held. So Jesus vanishes from their sight. They are denied a simple happy ending to the evening, basking in their friend's company, rehearsing his great escape and reminiscing about old times.

Why does Jesus not stay? Surely this too is characteristic. He is the one who was and is on the move: going ahead, beyond Emmaus, beyond Jerusalem, going ahead with his sparkling words and bold actions. Ahead into all the

world, with his mysterious truth and wild hope that won't stay still but urge us on to follow.

On this journey it may well seem that we can never grasp it all, never catch up with him. But then perhaps a stranger will come alongside us and open our eyes again. Yet that won't be the end of the journey, and it won't be a return to normality, much as we might yearn for that. Normality was not restored for Cleopas and his companion nor for the other disciples. No, they were set on fire, filled with praise, sent into new places and new risks.

But still companions, companions of each other and of the living Jesus. The word *companion* literally means one you share bread with – as they did at Emmaus, and as, please God, we shall soon do again in St John's church. Stay with us, Lord ...

But when we as companions do return to his table and share in his Body and Blood, this won't be the restoration of normality – no, thank God not! We will not be the same, nor will the Church, nor even in a way will Christ. He too will have moved on, into new truth and new hope; for he is risen, and we cannot hold him.

What today's collect calls the 'knowledge of his presence with us' is not necessarily a restful, comfortable experience; not a cure-all drug or vaccination. The journey ahead may be unsettling. But for all this, and in all our present fear and uncertainty, we have a pioneer who goes ahead. So still we can say and sing, 'Praise to you, O Christ!'

