

The Mass and Emmaus

On the same day that the disciples discovered Jesus had risen from the tomb, two of them set out for Emmaus, a village seven miles west of Jerusalem. As they walked along, a stranger caught up with them – it was Jesus, but for some reason they didn't recognise him. Indeed he was the very last person they would have expected to meet given that they had witnessed his death on the cross and his burial and were, perhaps, still to be completely convinced that he had risen as they'd heard. They spent the remainder of the journey discussing the recent events in Jerusalem – not just Jesus' passion and death, but also the angels' message to the women of their group that he was alive – and Jesus himself trying to explain all the passages from scripture that foretold exactly what had happened.

When they eventually reached Emmaus, the disciples invited the stranger to spend the night, and so it was that they sat down to share an evening meal together. Perhaps a little strangely, given that he was the guest, it was Jesus who picked up the loaf of bread from the table, blessed it and began to break it for them. But it was in that action, still burned on their memories from the Last Supper, that they suddenly recognised who he was, but in that instant he vanished. "Then they said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?'" and they set out immediately, night or not, the seven miles back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples what had happened.

This is a story of something that actually happened as recorded in St Luke's gospel, but it also provides a perfect parable of the Mass.

Before we ever come to church we are going about our business just as the disciples were, our minds focused on other things as theirs were – they were intent on bringing the news of what had gone on to the people of Emmaus (though to whom, and why Emmaus, we don't know). But anyway they were clearly so preoccupied that they hardly gave a second glance to the stranger who caught up with them and joined in their conversation.

When we make the journey to church and come into God's house and Our Lord's presence in the Blessed Sacrament, we need to consciously make the transition involved. We need to acknowledge that we have come into the presence of God and conduct ourselves accordingly (otherwise we are in danger of hardly giving him a second glance). Mentally we have to switch off from the preoccupations of the world outside and focus in on why we are there and what it is we are about to do. In prayer we enter into conversation with Our Lord, ensuring he becomes our companion – that *we* join *him* and that he isn't a stranger who has to force himself onto us. And in that conversation, like the

disciples, we should talk to him about all the things that are going on in our life, sharing with him our concerns and troubles, placing before him the particular needs of family members and friends, bringing into our conversation with God the needs of the sick and the dying and commending to him those who have died. And all of this should be done in an unhurried way long before the Mass itself begins. If it doesn't happen, then we have not prepared ourselves properly for the Mass we are about to celebrate.

As the Mass begins, we have an advantage over the disciples in the gospel story in that we know who Jesus is, whereas, for a while, they didn't. We move into the first part of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word, knowing whose word it is we are listening to; they didn't. It was only later when he broke bread with them that the penny dropped and the reality dawned. "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?" How much more might their hearts have burned, how much more might they have gained from his word, if they had appreciated at the time that it was Jesus speaking to them? We *do* know, so what should that say in terms of how we listen to his word? What should it say about the ministry of those commissioned by the Church to proclaim his word and their preparation for doing so?

Every Mass is different: different seasons and feasts, different scripture readings, different prayers, a different mix of people gathered for the celebration. The word of God in scripture is certainly a factor in what that day's Mass is all about. It sets the theme for us according to whether it is Advent, Lent, Easter, "ordinary time", or a particular feast or solemnity. We need to hear what God is saying to us relative to the season or feast we are celebrating – if we don't, or if we miss it, then we have no idea what that entire and important aspect of the celebration is all about.

If our hearts are not already burning within us having been nourished by God's word, we may find ourselves struggling to recognise who it is who, later, breaks the bread for us. In a sense it would be like going to a restaurant and finding that someone else has chosen from the menu for us. The meal arrives and while we may well like that person's choice, we would have much preferred to make the meal our own by having decided for ourselves what was going to appear on our plate. So with the Mass in the sense that the word of God sets the scene; we bring the word of God (and what we have gained from it) with us into the rest of our celebration. It anticipates and sets up the Liturgy of the Eucharist that follows.

(A quick word of caution against taking the restaurant/meal analogy too far. The word of God is *not* an hors d'oeuvre before the entrée – we can't take it or leave it – both are important parts of the one source of spiritual nourishment that is the Mass.) Meanwhile, back at Emmaus...

When Jesus joined the disciples at table and broke the bread for their meal, in that instant their eyes were opened and they finally recognised him. It seems to have been a “déjà vu” experience for them as the way Jesus said the blessing and broke the bread reminded them instantly of his words and actions at the Last Supper. There was an instant recognition and acknowledgement of who this person at table with them was, but as mysteriously as they had failed to recognise him until then, equally mysteriously he vanished from their sight.

We don't always recognise, or appreciate, what we have and what is happening before our very eyes each time we celebrate the eucharist. It's not just a re-enactment of what happened at the Last Supper; what happened then actually happens again. At the words of consecration, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus becomes really present on the altar under the appearance of bread and wine - not only so that we can then physically receive him under those signs as he asked us to, but also, we might suppose, because it is far easier for us to deal with through our human senses than if we could actually see Jesus himself in all his power and glory. Of course, Jesus *is* really present in his power and glory but, if I can put it this way, he “turns down the volume” for us by appearing in a way we can deal with more easily.

However we do have to keep consciously opening our eyes and our hearts to this supreme miracle, this central mystery of our faith, otherwise we are not recognising him in the breaking of the bread. When young (and even not so young) people say they are bored at Mass, what are they expecting? The priest shouldn't have to come out dressed as a clown and with a string of jokes to hand. If the real presence of Jesus Christ on our altar doesn't grab our attention, then nothing less than that reality is going to. If, still, we are struggling, what will open our eyes? - God's grace. “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.”

There was actually one important difference between the meal at Emmaus and the one the disciples had shared with Christ at the Last Supper – at Emmaus they don't seem to have eaten anything. Jesus vanishes from their sight in the act of breaking the bread and, according to St Luke, “they set out that instant and returned to Jerusalem”.

It provides an interesting reflection for those who still think the Mass is only, or even mostly, about receiving holy communion. The disciples were sufficiently nourished by Our Lord's words to them on the road, and sufficiently motivated by their experience of him before they had actually shared the meal, that they set off immediately to bring the good news of their experience to the others in Jerusalem. It is also a very positive indicator of the power and encouragement to be gained from studying the word of God in scripture without including communion in such a service or gathering. Except for extra-ordinary circumstances, communion is celebrated within the context of the Mass.

The hasty and enthusiastic departure of the disciples for Jerusalem provides one final element in the parallel between the Emmaus story and the Mass.

At the end of Mass we are sent out “to love and serve the Lord”. We are meant to go out into our world to *live* the eucharist (both word and sacrament) that we have celebrated. It reminds us of the mandate given to those disciples who witnessed Our Lord’s Transfiguration. While St Peter suggested that it was good for them to be there on the mountain enjoying that mysterious experience, the reality was that there was work to be done down off the mountain, spreading the gospel message in the real world. That was the reaction of the two disciples in Emmaus. They took their experience of the heart warming word of God which Jesus had shared with them, and their recognition of him in the breaking of bread, and they set off “that instant” to spread the news that he was risen from the dead.

As our Mass ends, we should be following in their footsteps and equally hastily, not because we are glad Mass is over, but because we are newly empowered by the eucharist (word and sacrament) we have celebrated. Whether we feel like it or not, power has come into us, the power of the Holy Spirit imparted by God’s word and sacrament, and it has been given to us to share. “Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?” They set out that instant and returned to Jerusalem. Then they told their story of what had happened on the road and how they had recognised Jesus at the breaking of the bread.”

*Stay with us, Lord Jesus, be our companion on our way.
In your mercy inflame our hearts and raise our hope
so that, in union with our brothers and sisters,
we may always recognise you in the scriptures,
and in the breaking of bread.*

[Evening Prayer, Tuesday Week 4]

* * *

Fr Neil McNicholas