

Third Sunday of Easter
May 8, 2011

We begin with the two disciples of Jesus. Terribly discouraged disciples. Disciples whose refrain is “We were hoping.” All they can think about is a Jesus they had known, had followed, a Jesus who had been captured and crucified, now seemingly stone cold dead. And so they are leaving Jerusalem, the city of dashed hopes. Even when another Jew joins them, the discouragement prevails. They can talk only of “a prophet mighty in deed and word,” come to an untimely end. Even the empty tomb fails to excite them.

What changes them? Three things. First. A stranger joins them. Jesus indeed, but not recognized. A stranger to whom they open their saddened hearts, their hopelessness.

Second. A lesson in Scripture. Don’t they realize from their own Scripture that the Messiah must suffer before entering into his glory? Then Jesus interprets for them what the whole of the Hebrew Testament has to say about him. And their hearts burn: “Were not our hearts on fire within us as he was speaking to us on the road and opened to us the sense of the Scriptures?” And still they do not recognize him.

Third. Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them. Then it is that the disciples recognize him. It is with the gift of faith, stimulated by his actions, that they recognize the risen Christ. And they rush back to Jerusalem to tell the Eleven and their companions, to explain “what had happened on the road and how he became known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

The lesson? Jesus is no longer present to his disciples in his visible humanity but in the breaking of the bread.

Did you catch it as you heard the Gospel? The three stages in the disciples’ experience foreshadow three ways in which Christ is present to us in our Sunday liturgy. First, the reality that happens as soon as we gather together. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Jesus is present to us the moment we come together.

Second. Vatican II phrased it simply. Christ “is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the church.” Am I aware that when the Scripture is proclaimed, Christ is speaking to me? Do I echo young Samuel in the Old Testament, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening?” Oh yes, the readings can be difficult. A snippet from St. Paul without context may not sound like Christ. But there he is, speaking to my heart. But my heart must be open.

And third? The body and blood of Christ. When the priest takes bread, blesses it, breaks it. When the blessed and broken bread is given. The burning question: Do I thrill to his presence within me? Do I recognize him, recognize that here again is “God with us.”

So then, three ways to recognize Christ. Prefigured in the two discouraged disciples plodding to Emmaus, the subject of the three paintings that will grace our east wall, realized even more remarkably in our Eucharist. Christ in our assembling. Christ in our hearing. Christ in our table fellowship and in our flesh.

It is a wonderful thing to encounter the risen Christ. Anti-Christian Saul recognized the Lord when he fell to the ground and heard the shocking words “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Augustine recognized Jesus in a garden, when “a voice from some nearby house” urged him to “take and read.” And he opened the New Testament. Novelist Flannery O’Connor relates why a relative was attracted to the Church: “the sermons were so horrible, he knew there must be something else there to make the people come.”

Each of you has come to recognize the risen Lord. Each of you has your own story. But however different your stories, one fact is common to all of us: We would not be here if the risen Christ had not taken the initiative. That is why we recognize him when his word is proclaimed. That is why we recognize him when his body nestles in our hand and his blood on our lips.

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