

3rd Sunday of Easter (A)
(Acts 2:14.22-28 / Luke 24:13-35)
...where they are

At the beginning of his Gospel, in his infancy narrative, St Luke describes how God chose to become one of us. The Good News the evangelist proclaims to the world is that God decided to meet us where we were and as we were, on earth and in our flesh. We could have imagined that God would have remained above and that he would have just called us to him. No, he sent his Son with the mission to walk alongside us the path which leads back to him.

In case we may not have understood this, at the end of his Gospel account, in the story we have just heard today, St Luke repeats this same message. Cleopas and his fellow pilgrim represent all of us, men and women who are downcast and unable to understand the full meaning of their lives, and then Jesus “comes up and walks by their side”. Again, just as in the manger thirty years before, Jesus decides to come and walk with us. He could have waited for the two pilgrims in Emmaus, he could wait for each one of us at the end of our earthly pilgrimage but, faithful to his mission, Jesus does not leave us to make the journey on our own, he comes to share in our struggles with pain, sadness and disappointment, he joins us and he carries with us all that weighs us down, all that slows down the pace of our journey.

Christ does not ask of us anything that has not been asked of himself first of all. As he has done for each one of us, he asks us to do it for one another. The mission of the Church is to meet all men and women where they are, not where they should be or where they would like to be, just where they are. Almost 50 years ago, the 2nd Vatican Council expressed the Church’s mission as follows: “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men and women of our time, especially of those who are poor and afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find and echo in their hearts.” (LG 1)

We should note that the Council does not invite us to be touched first by what we can see on our TV screen or hear on the radio about people suffering on other parts of our country or in far off lands. It is important to remember that compassion begins at home, at work, in our neighbourhood. Our communion with those who live far away will be real if it is rooted in our real communion with those who live with us or next door to us. We have to make ourselves the fellow pilgrims of all, and first of all of those who are close to us.

Let us remember that Christ descended into hell in order to redeem Adam and Eve, our ancestors and, at least chronologically, the first sinners. Today our mission is to go wherever a brother or a sister is in need of salvation and liberation, of peace and care, of love and attention. And we may not have to walk very far in order to meet with such a brother or sister!

Just as when he walked with the two pilgrims on the road to Emmaus, the Risen Lord took the time to listen to them and then, with the Scriptures, he gave meaning to what had happened in their lives so we are called to do the same. Sometimes we may give the impression that in our Churches and in our communities, we do not really listen to people, we are ready to give answers before they have even asked anything of us. We know what is good for them, we know what they should do and even more what they should not do and we are keen to tell them... and the problem here is that we dare to think that we are evangelising them or proclaiming the Good News to them when we act like this!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that: “The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love of God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them.”

However our listening is not only for our information it is also, and indeed more, for our transformation. Just as Jesus did with Cleopas and his friend, we have a journey to accomplish.

We have to change the way we look at things and at people. We are a pilgrim people. As Christians, we do not meet with people where they are just in order to settle down with them there, we have to go with them where the Lord wants us to be.

“Christ is the same, yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8) and yet he is always new, ever ready to connect with our generation and our time, always attentive to what happens today in our personal lives and in our world.

As Richard Rohr writes: “God is found in the actual – not in the idealized.” In order to meet God, we must first accept reality. God is far too real to be found anywhere else. The two disciples had to realise that God was present in the life and death of Jesus and that he was present too in the humility and the poverty of a piece of bread and in a cup of wine. Now God is with us always, in our real lives, in our pains and our joy, in our ups and downs and even when we are weak and when we sin.

Whatever our opinion of our society and of our Churches, they are not in a better or in a worse place than they were 50 or 200 years ago. We cannot idealize or reject them, for they are the holy ground where God waits for us and wants us to sow the seed of his life.

After their meeting with the Lord, Cleopas and his friend returned to Jerusalem, which was originally the place of disappointment and death for them. As Christians we are called to go to the places of darkness, loneliness and meaninglessness in our families and communities, in our country and in our world, precisely in order to bring these places the light, the presence and the meaningfulness of Christ and his Gospel.

In 1959, Saint John XXIII asked a question which is still relevant for us: “I have never had any doubts against faith. But one thing causes me consternation. Christ has been on the cross with his arms out-stretched for two thousand years. Where have we got to in proclaiming the Good News?” (Hebblethwaite, p. 319)