

Third Sunday of Easter

[Acts 2: 14, 22b-28; Psalm 16; 1Peter 1:17-21; Luke 24:13-35]

As we come to the Word of God this week, we are all experiencing a strong need for understanding, and this on a number of levels. We continue to look for deeper understanding of the COVID-19 virus and how best to deal with it. In this regard, the daily updates from the medical officers, complete with charts and graphs, are of great help. At the same time we are feeling, too, a strong need for understanding at a deeper level in the face of an event that defies all comprehension. The terrible mass murder in Nova Scotia is often, and rightly, referred to as senseless, devoid of meaning. Our search for understanding is also reaching beyond the present moment to the future, as we struggle to understand how we are to rebuild our lives. What future direction are we to follow, as families coming to terms with the absence of a loved one, or as a people wanting to know how best to come out of this pandemic in a way that maintains the communion and solidarity that have so far marked our collective response to the virus?

With respect to both our present and future, the text this morning from the Gospel of St. Luke enlightens us with the understanding we seek. What happened on that road to Emmaus so long ago helps us to find meaning in our present and direction for our future.

I'll begin with the present moment. Right away we find a remarkable similarity between the experience of the two companions on the road and what we are going through now. Their hearts, too, were crushed in response to a tragic event that left them in deep anguish. Their friend and Master, Jesus, the one in whom they had placed great hope for the liberation of Israel, was dead. They had seen with horror and fear the powerful virus of jealousy and misunderstanding take his life. As they walked along that road, they struggled to make sense of everything that had occurred, but could not. Then something happened along that road that changed everything for them by opening their minds to understanding. This, in turn, transformed their sadness to joy and their despair to hope.

What happened, of course, was that they met the Risen Lord, although at first they did not recognize him. As Jesus walked with them and taught them, he directed their attention not to charts, graphs or models but to the Word of God. He led them through the sacred books that told of God's activity from the beginning of time to fashion, guide and save his beloved people. The content of the Scriptures is something those two disciples would likely have already known. But Jesus instructed them in such a way as to prepare them for a radically new level of understanding. He interpreted all of Scripture in relation to himself and then made known his presence in the breaking of the bread. No wonder their hearts burned within them! No wonder their hearts, which had grown cold with despair, were now aflame with hope! They experienced for themselves what St. Peter would later preach in Jerusalem, namely, that not even death can hold their beloved Jesus in its power. What is more, this same Jesus, crucified and risen, Jesus towards whom Moses, the prophets and all of scripture had pointed, and for whom all of humanity had waited, was with them, and would always remain with them – and with us – in the breaking of bread we now call the Eucharist.

So, as regards our present moment and the need we have to make sense of current experience, the events on the road to Emmaus teach us that, even though dark, painful and bewildering events may overwhelm and paralyze us, and often leave us with many unanswered

questions, they nevertheless ultimately have no power over our Risen Lord, who will never abandon us, his beloved ones. When we allow this understanding to take deep root within us, our hearts, too, begin to burn as we receive that great gift that only the Gospel can give: the blessed assurance and real peace that is, in fact, beyond all understanding, but which nonetheless succeeds in transforming our sadness and fear to joy and hope. This, in turn, gives us the courage and freedom to lift our gaze from the present and direct it toward the future.

Here we come to that question I mentioned earlier that in many ways preoccupies all of us now. How are we to shape our future? What is the right direction to take? Again, we look to what happened on the Emmaus road. In regard to this question of future direction, the decision the disciples took after they recognized Jesus is instructive for us. They gave up all idea of going to Emmaus and returned instead to Jerusalem. This is precisely what we must do, too, as we face our future: turn away from Emmaus and back to Jerusalem. Allow me to develop this for a moment.

Moved by sadness and grief because they had not yet fully grasped that Jesus had risen from the dead, the two companions set out from Jerusalem for this village called Emmaus. Today we do not know with any degree of certainty where Emmaus is to be found. Archaeologists have identified two or three sites that might be the ancient village. So, the road to Emmaus now represents the many pathways on which failed understandings or bitter disappointments can launch us if we allow them to overshadow the truth of God's loving accompaniment, routes that moreover only deepen our sadness since they lead in uncertain directions toward unknown destinations. This is the life of futility against which St. Peter warns us in his letter, the futile ways from which Jesus ransomed us when he died and rose for us at Jerusalem. So, walking toward Emmaus cannot represent our future direction. The course correction undertaken by the two disciples tells us that it must be the path to Jerusalem.

We do know where Jerusalem is. More importantly, we understand what it symbolizes. Jerusalem is the place of divine revelation. It is the site of the Cross and Resurrection, by which God manifested the infinite depths of his love for the world, and revealed the divine logic that has shaped, guided and carried all of human history: the logic of gift. God gave his Son out of love for the world. Jesus gave his own life that we might live. This divine logic is now to be that which guides the life of all God's children. Only by making our lives a total gift for God and others will we be on the road to Jerusalem, following the right future direction, that leaves behind all that is futile and leads to real and abiding communion, solidarity and peace among all peoples.

When we are seized with the truth of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and know with certainty that he is with us, then we understand that neither the present nor the future need ever be a source of fear for us. Jesus, the Lord of all history, is present with us both now and in the future in the full power of his risen life. He is present, as he showed the companions, in the breaking of the bread, the Eucharist, toward which we shall turn in a moment. In these days of physical absence from the mass, it is good also to recall the other ways the Lord has determined to make himself present so that we can encounter him there, too: in his sacred Word; whenever two or three gather in his name, such as in the family; and in the persons of the poor, sick, and marginalized. May Jesus open our eyes, as he opened those of the companions, to the many modes of his presence, so that we may encounter him anew and find in him the understanding that brings peace, and the right road that leads to communion and solidarity in this life and salvation in the next.