

3rd SUNDAY OF EASTER 4th MAY 2014

THE HOLY STRANGER. (Luke 24: 13-35)

“*Alex, I just met God!*” declared Father Adam Smallbone to his lovely wife after his particular *via dolorosa*, carrying a large wooden cross in the small hours through the streets of London’s East End. It was during a time of considerable personal turmoil which had gone viral and affected his ministry at St Saviour in the Marshes. If you haven’t been following Rev on BBC2 for the last 6 weeks on Monday nights, let me quickly explain that the third series of this half-hour comedy programme about a struggling Anglican-catholic clergyman became increasingly dark as things fell apart for him. Quite plainly, Christians, and indeed others watching, were to note the parallels with the passion of Christ. Having dragged the heavy cross to a hilltop wasteland, Adam finds himself at dawn in company of a long-haired Irishman, clad in a shell suit and woolly hat, beer can in hand, who knows his name, understands his suffering and affirms he will always be there for him - even though he vanishes straightaway afterwards. The last two episodes, in particular, were not only intensely moving but also had the kind of powerful exposition of Faith which can really only be shown through drama. If you didn’t catch them then watching on iPlayer is recommended, even if you’re squeamish about what is coyly announced beforehand as ‘strong language.’

That meeting on the high ground was unexpected - little Father Adam at his lowest ebb, alone, rejected by his friends, not knowing where to turn. The final episode ended with the Easter Vigil Mass celebrated in the beloved parish church which had just been closed. We’re left not knowing where the Smallbone family will fetch up, or how the St Saviour’s congregation will be dispersed, but with mighty hope in our hearts as their baby daughter is baptised early on Easter morning in presence of the Archdeacon and the Reader who had precipitated his downfall. The connections are evident, not only with the Passion, but also the encounter of the faithful with the risen Christ.

The Emmaus Road resurrection encounter, followed by the meal at the close of day, is a masterpiece beautifully told only by Luke. Let’s note a few details in sequence. These two Easter Day walkers, Cleopas and his companion - sometimes thought to be his wife, as she was one of the women who had witnessed the crucifixion – were disciples, but not of the twelve. They had certainly seen and heard a lot during the earthly ministry of Jesus. They knew what he looked like, but will have missed certain key events, among them, of course, the Last Supper. They would for sure, however, have heard the Lord quoting the Old Testament scriptures, relating them to himself as fulfilment and foreshadowing his suffering and death. Somehow it hadn’t registered though, and they persisted with their own old ideas of how they expected the Messiah to have saved Israel by force.

Not so surprising, then, the “Stranger’s” impatience at their lack of understanding: “How *foolish* you are!” These sad, shocked, disappointed, frightened, disillusioned, weary people have lost the plot. Together, as Jesus’s friends, they talk nineteen-to-the-dozen, as do many after bereavement, trying to make sense of what has happened. They surely welcome the third person joining them who, they think, doesn’t yet know the news. It’s their chance to go through it all again, even admonishing him for not being up to speed! (How human they are, these two!) They hear amazing words which set them on fire in spite of their disorientated state, but can’t work out why. Probably they were the same words from Scripture on the lips of Peter and Stephen and Philip and Paul in Acts as they preach to the Jews: all Scripture culminates in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The light bulb moment comes after the meal - the taking, blessing, breaking, sharing of bread. Remember, they had not been there in the Upper Room at Passover. But had they been there at the feeding of the five thousand?

What happened at the Emmaus supper table? Some kind of completion, evidently, since afterwards he vanished from their sight. Bread happened: the staple diet, the perfect symbol of God’s love, revealed in a broken body, given in love and for love. Not to be preserved, but consumed by hungry mouths, digested in empty stomachs. Best enjoyed when it is warm and fresh. Like love, it naturally lends itself to being given away, shared; easily replenished.

The Emmaus journey and meal at the end exemplify and shape the Eucharist as we know it. The way it's told by Luke is deliberate and explains why the Eucharist has been the central act of worship of the Church from the beginning. Nothing can match the Mass for the way we encounter the risen Christ in word and sacrament. It explains why so often we arrive hungry and go away satisfied, why things happen here that we are not always aware of or can explain at the time, but fall into place later. Why companionship (which literally means *bread fellow-ship*) is of the essence – different from encounters when we are alone. Why we, also, feel the sense of completion, (or should that be *completeness*?) afterwards.

And yet it is also a beginning. We start the week with Mass, on Sunday, the first day of the new week, Resurrection day. (In some ways the comparatively new custom of calling Saturday and Sunday the weekend is, for Christians, a misnomer.) Certainly for those first Easter Day walkers, it was both an end and a beginning. TS Eliot opens *East Coker* in the *Four Quartets* with the line “In my beginning is my end”, and finishes “In my end is my beginning” - which certainly resonates with the Emmaus encounter. Understanding this, maybe, the companions return to Jerusalem to tell the eleven what had happened on the road and how Christ had been made known to them in the breaking of bread. And here's a point for us to ponder. This first sharing of that experience is with fellow disciples, confirming each other in faith. Sharing with outsiders comes a bit later, after Pentecost. That might indicate where to start in our undoubted duty to evangelise, tell others.

Christian communities are shaped by the action of Christ in the Eucharist. He joins us as we gather, knowing what occupies our minds. He expounds the scriptures, makes himself known to us in the breaking of the bread. We are thereby empowered to share that experience with others. Perhaps we should emulate Cleopas and his companion - practise sharing faith *with fellow disciples* rather more than we do; encourage one another. In our tradition we're used to speaking of the presence of Christ in word and sacrament. We are perhaps less good at recognising his risen presence simply in the fellowship which that might engender. But it is maybe where we should begin: deepening relationships with Christian friends, continuing the journey after the meal. When it happens it is very special and strengthening. I well remember an earnest conversation when travelling by car with a fellow Christian. We got on to the subject of prayer. “But *this* is prayer”, he said simply, and I understood immediately what he meant. Both of us were conscious of the presence of Another.

The gentle ripples from such talk are far-reaching, more than we could ever know or even guess. They may well be much more powerful than what is penned hurriedly by journalists meeting deadlines, or spoken by vote-catching politicians - or even archbishops! - over the airways. They are a constituent part of the leaven, the small secret ingredient in bread-making, which permeates the kingdom. That sharing of the Christian life as journeying and eating, both in worship and outside it, is always precious.

Rather than all roads leading to Rome, they lead to Emmaus, don't they? But then they also start there too. And we need to be aware and alert. The “holy stranger” might well be shell-suited, woollen-hatted - or just loaf-shaped.

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