

TALK FOR SUNDAY 26TH APRIL 2020

LUKE 24: 13-END The Road to Emmaus

Every Christmas the Sisters at Burnham Abbey give out gifts of crib cards from a simple wicker basket in their chapel. On each crib card is a word or words describing a quality, and also the name of a saint to help you pray for that quality. This year the crib card I randomly picked out had the quality “HOPE” written on it along with the name of St. Clement, who I have since found out has the “anchor of hope” as his commemorative symbol.

When the coronavirus pandemic first started, I was listening to the news several times a day, but found, probably like you did, that this was just worrying me and depressing me. So, I quickly stopped doing this and just focused on the daily briefing given by the politicians at around 5pm and then the evening news later on. But the items of news which really made my ears prick up were those which gave a sense of hope. The news that people were getting better and being discharged from hospital for example. The news that people were obeying the social distancing measures and that this was making a real difference. The news that our brilliant NHS was coping. The news that less people were dying. All these lifted my spirits because they gave me hope.

At the heart of our Gospel text today is hope. It's one of the most beautiful stories in the Bible. It's one that we at All Saints should be very familiar with as it's probably Fr Jeremy's favourite and most referred to Bible text. Indeed, if we were in church today, the inside cover of our worship booklet would recall for us this wonderful story.

One of the beautiful strands in the resurrection stories are the encounters that took place between Jesus and those who were still grieving him. The gospels tell us that the disciples were profoundly changed by their encounters with Jesus after his resurrection. There is a distinct transformation in the affective experience of those who knew Jesus when they encountered his risen self: from grief, sorrow, fear and

hopelessness at his death, to hope, life, joy and energy to go out and tell others after his resurrection.

In our story today, we hear of two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Notice they are walking away from Jerusalem; they are journeying away from hope. They've witnessed their friend, their hoped-for saviour die. They've seen their community scattered. In one short week their hopes and their world came crashing down around them. Remember that on Palm Sunday the energy of the disciples had been at fever pitch when the excited crowds hailed Jesus as the Messiah. But now their expectations have been dashed, the dream was over, they think their trust in God was misplaced. What is left for them?

And then a stranger comes along and joins them. He doesn't seem to know about the things that had happened. "Haven't you heard about Jesus of Nazareth?" they say. "We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel". As Jesus fell into step alongside them, he became aware of their sorrows, he listened as they poured out their hearts, he recognised their brokenness. Jesus didn't hurry them or tell them to snap out of it. He didn't point out that they were wrong or should have listened more carefully. He waited with them with patient gentleness. Listened to their sorrows. Until, at last, they were ready.

Jesus of course, turns them round-quite literally by doing three important things here: he opens scripture, he opens their eyes and then he opens their minds.

Human hope is a fragile thing and hopelessness is desperately hard to cure. The two disciples put up a wall of hopelessness around them to such an extent that, at first, they did not recognise Jesus. But once Jesus has unpacked the word of God to them, they move from faces downcast, to exclaiming in wonder, "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road?"

Later the two-Emmaus bound pilgrims reached out to take a piece of bread only to see candlelight shining through the holes in the stranger's hands. And when Jesus broke, blessed and gave them the bread, their eyes were opened, and they recognised him. Even though he vanished from their sight they were not disappointed. Their faith was no longer downcast as their eyes had been on that earlier journey. They were no longer confused, or sad, or struggling but instead things were clear, joyful and certain. The ashes of the coals of hope had been reignited. They were no longer hopeless but burning with hope.

The disciples reverse direction, and having seen and met the risen Christ, head back to Jerusalem full of joy to proclaim the good news to their fellow disciples.

What is so wonderful about scripture is that each time we read it, something new can call out to us, something which is perhaps relevant to what is happening in our lives here and now. With this passage today, in the middle of the coronavirus lockdown, I get a sense that it can be used as a model for prayer or as a focus for meditation. For example-I start out feeling hopeless, worried, anxious and then Jesus comes by unobtrusively. I welcome him and tell him my story bringing before him my problems, my agonies. He listens intently, then gently throws light and hope on what has been bothering me. I don't want him to leave, but I know he will always be watching out for me and will meet me again.

This story highlights the living hope we have in the Resurrection of Jesus. We are all pilgrims on the road to Emmaus, the road of life, possibly even more so at this difficult time. But Jesus comes alongside us and walks with each of us on our roads, in our worries, our fears and our anxieties. The risen Christ wants to be active and present in our lives. Let us welcome and recognise the stranger that joins us on our journey, that listens to us and gives us hope, so that our hearts are warmed by his company and our lives set on fire with passion to want to share with others that we know the risen Lord.

Let us pray-

Gracious and holy Father, please give us:

Intellect to understand you;

Reason to discern you;

Diligence to seek you;

Wisdom to find you;

A spirit to know you;

A heart to meditate upon you;

Ears to hear you;

Eyes to see you;

A tongue to proclaim you;

A way of life pleasing to you;

Patience to wait for you;

And perseverance to look for you.

Amen.

(A prayer of St Benedict)