60 Stadia

April 26th, 2020

3rd Sunday of Easter

Several journeys in the New Testament invite us into a rich symbolism that opens us to a real encounter with God. Joseph and Mary abandon their fears and travel to Bethlehem where Christ is born (Luke 2:1-21); Jesus journeys into the wilderness to confront and overcome evil (Luke 4:1-13); Jesus rides a colt into Jerusalem as the reign of God dawns (Luke 19:28-40). Later still, Paul embarks on a fateful journey up the road to Damascus to meet the Risen Christ (Acts 9:1-22). The gospel of Mark is noteworthy for repeated references to geography and the constant use of the word “straightway.” Though this is often omitted or translated as “at once” or “immediately,” it really “echoes the message of the prophetic voice in chapter 1 that cries out in the desert, telling the people to prepare for God’s coming by making ‘straight’ his ‘ways’…Mark was so intrigued by his this pun…that he uses it forty-three times in his Gospel” (Marie Noonan Smith, *The Gospel According to Mark,* Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, 11). It is a gospel of constant motion, of constant spiritual travel. Our reading today is from the Gospel of Luke (Luke 24:13-36), a gospel also rich in the motion, language, and symbolism that illustrates our spiritual pilgrimage. God is on a journey in the gospels, and God is inviting us onto this very same journey.

And it is on a journey of 60 stadia, or about 12 kilometres, from Jerusalem to Emmaus, that we encounter two disciples and the Lord Jesus. One of the most reassuring things we learn in this encounter is that the disciples did not see Jesus: “Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (Luke 24:15-16). These merciful verses remind us that, though we do not always see or recognize Christ, Jesus is nevertheless there, walking alongside us through our grief, darkness and confusion. Moreover, Jesus is speaking to us, asking us questions: “And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’” (Luke 24:17). Whether you hear his voice or not, God is always asking this, always concerned about the things on your heart. The disciples are eyewitnesses, and they recount to Jesus all that they have observed: “They replied, ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.’” (Luke 24:19-24). There is only one thing wrong with their otherwise factual and accurate report of what they have observed or heard; it is the one sentence: *“But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel”* (Luke 24:21). They had given up hope; they had lost faith in the promises that Jesus himself had given to his followers. In most of the predictions of his own death, Jesus also said that the Son of Man would rise again (Matthew 16:21-23, Matthew 17:22-23, Matthew 20:17-19, etc.) God has given us reason to observe and understand many things under the sun, but as great as our understanding may be, it is never enough to perceive the real narrative of what God enacts for our salvation, especially when we lack faith in what God has already revealed. There is a striking difference between the report of the disciples and what happens next.

The teacher walks alongside his friends and teaches them: “Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:25-27). One is reminded of what Jesus told the scribes in the Gospel of John: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). In life, we are far more ready to consult a commentary, a theologian, or the voice of the crowd about who Jesus is before we let the scriptures speak, before we let Jesus himself speak to us about the scriptures. A great part of our spiritual journey should be spending daily time in the word, letting the Lord open our hearts to its message, its hope for our lives. Wherever we go, our hearts and minds should be seeking the handprints of Jesus in our lives. On the first stage of the journey, Jesus reveals who he is and what he has done by opening the scriptures to his disciples.

And then they come to a fork in the road. There is a road not taken here—the road that Jesus could have walked alone. That would have been a sad denouement to the story. And sadly, it is a story that is often repeated. One might read of Christ, one might even hear Christ speak through the word of God or through life experience, and yet return home without Him! There is the other road, the joyful road that the disciples take—they invite him to stay with them: “As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’” (Luke 24:28-32). Inviting Jesus into our lives results in communion, recognition and reflection. Their love for the stranger is rewarded in the revelation of Christ. After the breaking of bread, they reflect on the journey thus far and see how Christ inflamed them with sacred truths. Jesus has become part of their conversation. Sometimes complicated theology robs us of the simple beauty of gospel narratives. For sacramental theologians, the story ends here. One can easily make this just a story about the *liturgy of the word* and the *liturgy of the sacrament.* I would say that we encounter the *mystery of the word* and *the mystery of the sacrament.* It transcends the confines of worship, church structures, rituals; and I believe what is striking about this story is how the ordinary gives birth to the extraordinary. There is a road, there is dust, there is nightfall, there is warm bread, and there are three travelers talking about the most important event in their lives—and through all of this simplicity, God shows us what nourishes us in our spiritual pilgrimage, whether inside or outside a church, whether one reads the tomes of scholars or one is illiterate and cannot read a single word. On the second stage of the journey, Jesus invites us to desire his company and invite him in.

And thankfully, the story does not end there. The road goes ever, ever on, as J.R.R. Tolkien expresses it. As Antonio Machado the great Spanish poet once wrote: “Wanderer, your footsteps are the road…the road is made by walking.” The poor, tired disciples make another journey, another 60 stadia, back to Jerusalem to share what God has shown them: “That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’” (Luke 24:33-36). In our disenchanted, disturbed and disintegrated world, we mourn the absence of God while failing to seek Him or invite Him into our lives. Our text poses questions to us today. Are you walking with Christ? Are you listening and letting Christ teach you? Are you inviting Christ to abide with you in your home and in your life? Are you sharing the theophanies and epiphanies, your experiences of the Risen and Living Christ, with others in expectation of re-encountering Him and His peace? A spiritual theologian Jean-Baptiste Chautard once wrote two very provocative things about the interior life. The first is that “it makes the apostle capable of sanctifying others by his example.” The second is that “it makes the apostle radiate the supernatural” (Jean-Baptiste Chautard, *The Soul of the Apostolate*, O.C.S.O., Charlotte, NC: Saint Benedict Press, 1946, 119, 123). Truly, Jesus has said: “‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. ‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:13-16). What a different world it would be if we walked with Christ, learned from Christ, and became like Christ—became the salt and light that the world desperately needs to heal.

Christ has now appeared in three different ways—as a stranger on the road, in the breaking of bread, and in the proclamation of his resurrection. Christ will continue to be present; Christ will continue to appear in our lives. Not even tragedy will be an obstacle—the disciples on the road had just seen their greatest hope extinguished on the cross in the most gruesome manner imaginable—and yet God emerged from the darkness of that hopelessness to give them salt and light, to make them salt and light. In our days to come, let us become saints! Let us be salt and light! Let us sanctify the world and radiate the supernatural! Let us encounter Christ in the stranger, in the word, in the breaking of bread, in the sharing of the good news, in the anticipation that Jesus will always come to us, for truly Jesus will be with us to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20), and Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). The road is made by walking, let us walk the road with Christ today, tomorrow and for all time.