

Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2017 - Easter 3  
Year A  
Acts 2:14a,36-41  
Psalm 116:1-4,11-18  
1 Peter 1:13-25  
Luke 24:13-35

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

I love today's Gospel - at so many levels it captures for me the whole sense of our faith. The image of journey, the aspect of teaching within our faith, the lack of recognition of Jesus, and of course the Eucharistic overtones of the way in which Jesus is made known to the disciples. Such a rich passage.

Today I want to reflect on the journey. Many of you this year took up my invitation to immerse yourself in the journey that we made here in the parish towards Easter - through your involvement in the Lenten Study groups, and then the many services of Holy Week. There were a great number of services, I know - believe me, I felt it!

When he was Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams noted that although visitors do still attend church at Easter, they come in significantly less numbers than at Christmas... We see this here in our parish. He offered two reasons:

1. Because Easter is a journey... it takes longer to experience... it's not instantaneous.
2. And secondly because it's more demanding than Christmas - you can't avoid that it's about being changed.

While Christmas is one story... a contained event, Easter is far more complicated. It's a succession of events rolled into one extended narrative... and you can't just turn up for the final scene - Easter Day - and expect to understand what's happening. It's a journey and by the time we get to 'the day' itself, we've been through a lot and travelled quite a distance.

The services are designed not only to talk about, but also to act out in movement and ritual, the events of the last week of Christ's life. We begin with Palm Sunday, where along with the Jerusalem crowds, we receive and acclaim Jesus with joy. As Rowan points out... it's a cheerful day, (a bit like Christmas), where we feel we can welcome Jesus happily... because at first glance it appears he's come to fulfil all our desires... to bring peace, happiness and comfort.

But before the week goes too far, the story shifts to anything but cheerful... as darkness rises. By Maundy Thursday, no matter how beautiful the liturgy is, we're forced to face the ugliness of rejection and betrayal... and accept where all this is heading. In foot-washing... in bread and wine, body and blood... Jesus says this road he's on is about costly sacrifice.

That's where he's going, and us too if we dare accompany him. The Thursday liturgy ends with a procession to accompany him to the Garden of Gethsemane... and the emptiness we must face without his presence, is ritualised as we clear the sanctuary and turn out the light. Most of us go home quickly - the Garden is too much for us... we've gone far enough. A few stay... for a little while... but then we close the church, leaving Christ to his fate.

Rowan says that what happens to the crowds... and to us... is that we realise that the Jesus who arrived on Palm Sunday "is perhaps not quite what we want... he's making us feel uncomfortable. He's changing us. Human beings push back against that change. And they do it violently and horribly."

So when we return on Good Friday, the full reality of that rejection of Jesus is in our faces. In desolation, we tell the story of crucifixion and with lament we recognise our failure.. our complicity. We kiss the cross... recognising just ever so briefly that this too must be our way.

Then we make it to Easter Day... pure celebration. The tomb is empty and the risen Christ has been seen! Now is the time for new life. Even though we pushed him away, he's still with us... he'll be there with us wherever life takes us. Bring on the new life on - we're ready for it... even though we're still not entirely sure what that means. But we've been on a journey with Jesus. Something has happened to us. We can feel it... and it's worth celebrating.

That's the power of liturgy... The ritual, the symbolic acting-out of the story, carries us far deeper than mere 'thinking' ever can. It operates far deeper than our thoughts - it engages the heart, the imagination, the soul. It's not enough to read the story or to think about it... you've got to 'live' it.

It's challenging, because in this process we're not in control. This is not us thinking it through. This is the Spirit of God picking us up and carrying us places where we do not necessarily want to go. This is God's grace changing us, without us even knowing that it's happening. And so Rowan says it's too uncomfortable for visitors. Too challenging for a consumerist society, because it's too arduous and it takes too long. You can't just turn up for the party at the end and get that instant 'sugar hit' like Christmas. It's not instant gratification... The truth is, to really 'get-it', you need to go through this cycle year after year after year. Only with time is its full power revealed.

As if we needed a reminder of that it comes to us in today's Gospel. These two walking the road to Emmaus are disciples of Jesus - remember how at the end of the narrative they rush back and join the eleven, and others, to share their news. Yes, they are clearly part of the inner circle of Jesus' followers. And yet... and yet, they do not recognize the risen Christ. Yes, they see it eventually, in the liturgy of Christ breaking the bread. But until then they are in the dark.

In a way, that's our reality too. We hang around after Easter... catching glimpses of resurrection life... sort of knowing it's all pretty momentous... but we'd struggle to tell a stranger what our actual experience of resurrection life is. And that's fair enough... because resurrection life is new - it's not our old life reheated and made perfect... It's an entirely new life... a strange foreign territory that we're invited to enter and live in.

Poet Wendell Berry writes, "The question before me, now that I am old, is not how to be dead, which I know from enough practice, but how to be alive..." (repeat)

As the season of Easter stretches before us... seven short weeks for us to explore the mystery of resurrected life, we seek to learn how to be alive! We try to explore the mystery of new life... And the journey continues... We've got to Easter now ... and it's been quite a journey... But 'here' is not the destination - for ahead of us is a new land (that Jesus called the Kingdom)... and to live into it is going to take practice and exploration.

Let us practice what Wendell Berry suggests - let us practice, in this Easter season, how to be alive - for surely we can look to our Christ, made known to us in the breaking of the bread, and in the strength of that meal, to truly live...

In the name of God, Amen.