

SERMON FOR 3rd Sunday of Easter 30.4.17

ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD

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Throughout Christian art we have often displayed Jesus as something he would have never looked like. We all know the pictures, a blonde haired blue eye Jesus, who looks forever 18 years old, without a scratch on him. We may often describe this as the “sentimental” Jesus, eyes full-to-the-brim with affection and warmth.

But there are other works of art that depict Jesus in a different way. Suffering, a Middle Eastern man, dirty and rough, as perhaps a carpenter of his time would have been.

I have seen a painting which fits that last description.

1.

It has three figures walking together, one of them using his hands as if teaching. They are coming down from a mountain, following a long road; they did not occupy the center of the picture. Yet the defining feature of the painting was to be found in the three walkers. There was a kind of quiet intensity with them, as if the desert itself were listening. The painting almost invited its viewers to lean into the painting, to make out this conversation, to catch the discourse between teacher and companions.

I have no way of knowing whether the artist had the walk to Emmaus in mind, but it strikes me as an apt image for Luke’s second resurrection appearance.

There are some walks that are longer than others -- not because of the miles or even because of the landscape, but because of the burdens.

2.

I suspect this was one of the latter type. It was a seven-mile walk, a walk you would notice in your ankles and calves. But the real path they were walking was vastly longer and more difficult -- it was the walk of hopes in shambles. It was the walk taken through the valley of disillusionment. It was a walk burdened with perhaps accusation or shame.

The walk to Emmaus, a village seven or eight miles northwest of Jerusalem, is therefore one of the most powerful of the Easter stories. It took place during the afternoon of Easter Day. One disciple is identified as Cleopas; the other may well have been his wife. As they walked, they talked about the amazing events that had taken place in Jerusalem recently. And as they talked, the risen Jesus joined them.

3.

Notice what Luke tells us about their eyes. According to verse 16, their eyes were kept from recognizing him; according to verse 31, their eyes were opened and they recognized him. The question is, what happened to make the difference? And how can our eyes be opened as theirs were?

Firstly, we can know Christ through the Scriptures. Jesus reproved them for being so slow to believe the prophets, and then he took them through the three main divisions of the Old Testament—the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms (v. 44), explaining their teaching about the sufferings and glory of the Messiah. As Jesus had said earlier, "The Scriptures ... bear witness to me" (John 5:39 RSV). So we need to look for Christ in all the Scriptures. As we do so, our hearts will burn within us. That is our task not only when we come to church, but also in our own time.

4.

It is also not just about reading the bible, but also studying it. This will enable our eyes to be opened.

Secondly, we can know Christ through the breaking of bread. The Emmaus disciples may have seen the scars in his hands or recognized his voice. But it seems more likely that those four verbs Luke uses rang a bell in their memory, **‘that he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to them.’** It was then that their eyes were opened and they knew him. As they said later, "Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread" (Luke 24:35). Many Christians have testified to a similar experience. One example is John Wesley's mother, Susanna. When the words of administration were spoken to her one day, she confessed, "The words struck through my heart and I knew God for Christ's sake had forgiven me all my sins."

5.

I don't know about you, but everytime I come to the Eucharist my heart burns within me.

Weekly Eucharist has now become a part of our modern practice, it helps to balance out for us the way we experience God. The story of the Emmaus walk says to us that God speaks in many ways to different people. For these two men it was in the breaking of the bread, for the Apostle Thomas it was putting his fingers in his wounds, for Paul it was being knocked off his horse by a blinding light.

We need to open to all the many ways God speaks to us, especially as we celebrate Easter over these next fifty days.

Here, then, are two major ways by which Cleopas and his companion came to recognize the risen Lord, and by which we may know him today—through the Scriptures and through the breaking of bread,

6.

through the Word and the sacrament. Two things we participate in now, and are the pattern for all our worship.

7.