

Third Sunday of Easter

Year
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Acts 2:14, 22-33
Ps 16:1-2, 5, 7-8, 9-10, 11
I Pt 1:17-21
Lk 24:13-35

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The encounter of the two disciples with Jesus on the road to Emmaus is perhaps one of the most endearing human interest stories in Scripture. “Stay with us” is a testimonial to their emotional state and vulnerability as they clung to the stranger whose presence comforted them, reminding them of one who so often provided the same secure feeling. It was not intellectual stimulation that grabbed their attention; they were wounded human beings whose hearts were breaking because of the loss of a friend, a mentor, an inspiration. They were soothed by his compassion, a familiar memory of one whose loss they were grieving.

As I learn more about the person of Jesus of Nazareth and the times in which he lived, I try to imagine the impact of his personality, the attractive force of his teaching and the courage of his convictions on those who first heard him. He lifted the spirits those who were oppressed and exploited, who had scant prospects of a prosperous future. The extent of his effectiveness was compounded by the depth of their disadvantages; they were poor and getting poorer. The Roman oppressors and their collaborators among the wealthy of Jewish society were the focus of most of Jesus’ invectives against the rich and powerful, and they were the ones who were most rattled by his teaching. He was telling the poor and lowly that they deserved better, that they were God’s cherished children, and this was perceived as a threat by those who wanted their position in society guaranteed by the continuation of the status quo. It is perfectly understandable that Jesus attracted those who most needed to be assured of God’s love; he appealed to their longing spirits and gave them hope. Here was a man unafraid to stand up and point out the injustices of his time, as John the Baptist did before him. He was not preoccupied with the ripple effects or how his actions would affect him; he was convinced it was the right thing to do. Jesus was totally dedicated to the promotion of justice and was a constant reminder to those in power that they enjoyed their lofty status at the expense of and on the backs of the poor. He was dangerous.

And he was equally attractive to those who, although not poor and oppressed, were good, righteous, upstanding citizens and who deplored the injustices they witnessed. His teaching would enliven their hope for a better world and provide a rallying point for all good people who wanted to level the playing field and eradicate poverty and injustice.

Yes, Jesus was a man of compassion whose strength of character and sense of fairness

made people fall in love with him, the noble champion of the poor and powerless, of the good and just.

And then he was executed by the powerful who could no longer endure his prophetic preaching, both imperial Rome and the religious authorities who feared that his success would bring Rome's heavy hand down upon their comfortable existence. They had to get rid of him. Jesus was ripped away from his followers, leaving a gaping hole in the hearts of those whose hopes had been raised by his courageous stance against the wrongs rained upon his people, the people he loved and served so faithfully and selflessly.

In this light, it is understandable how two disciples, just a couple of days removed from this tragedy, could be so willingly distracted by the comforting words of a stranger and fail to recognize him. "Stay with us," they said; his gentle manner and even his challenging words about the Messiah endeared rather than rebuffed.

In the breaking of the bread they realized that Jesus was indeed still with them. He vanished from their sight, but not from their hearts. Soaring in spirit, they hurried back to share the good news with their friends that Jesus was very much alive and would be with them every step of the way as they carried on his mission. And that was the point, after all, to carry on the mission. It's what Jesus had tried to impress upon them in his lifetime. How much more can we honor those we love and admire than to carry on what they stood for, the good that they gave their lives for? This is how the spirit endures, indeed prevails. As Jesus no doubt had taught, inspired, led within the context of feeding their spirits, as he shared meals while among them, so now he would continue to be with them whenever they broke bread and shared wine, receiving the nourishment and strength to sustain their spirits on the mission of justice.

Every time we break bread and share the cup we remember the mission and meaning of Jesus Christ. More importantly, we recall who he is for us, the person whose courage and conviction inspired our ancestors in the faith to carry on his passion for justice. Although we do not see him the same way as they did, we experience Jesus in those who have successfully captured his spirit and carried on his mission. Those disciples on the road to Emmaus were the first, but they were not the last, to have the experience of Jesus Christ burning their hearts and lifting their spirits. We are those disciples now. May we continue to carry on as they did.