

Third Sunday of Easter

The two disciples told the eleven and their companions what had happened on the road to Emmaus, and how Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of bread...While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said:

“Peace be with you...Look me over from head to toe, touch me and see that a ghost is not flesh and bones like this.”



Luke 24, 35-48

At this stage of my life, I find that I don't go to weddings anymore, only to funerals, at which I find myself delivering the eulogy. Anyone preparing a eulogy normally sits with those who know the deceased, gathering stories and memories. Such meetings often end up with various friends and family members launching into: "Do you remember when he went up to the Cardinal and called him 'Your evidence' or when she embarrassed us all by telling the rent collector that mum was not able to speak with him because she was in the bedroom with the electrician?"

On reflection, we can come to appreciate that those who wrote the four Gospels relied heavily on stories about Jesus that had been passed on orally, by those who actually knew him, to the next generation, who in their turn related them to younger people who wanted to know more about Jesus. In time, such stories were changed in the ways in which story-tellers are used to doing. And remember, we are all story-telling people, who spend a good part of each day relating to others what we have selected from our experiences of the day as it has unfolded.

So, I suggest that a worthwhile preparation for reflecting on today's gospel-reading is to read quietly the whole of chapter 24 of Luke's Gospel. That chapter is Luke's version, with minor variations, of last Sunday's gospel-reading from John. It records memories of what occurred on the day Jesus was raised from the tomb. It leaves me with the impression that the prospect of new life heralded by Jesus' resurrection took hold of the disciples slowly, in fits and starts. Very few of us rush to grab the prospect of a new way of doing things, let alone a new approach to living. We take on the possibility of new life with a degree of caution we already know that embracing anything new requires change, and change is very often uncomfortable, even painful. New life, a new way of living and viewing the world, does not slip in quietly through the back door. Any mother will tell us, if we don't already know, that the pain of giving birth to new life is excruciating, as are the struggles to guide a child successfully through infancy, early childhood, adolescence and early adulthood to maturity. Maturing as Christians is just as painful.

Traumatized by the injustice and brutality of Jesus' trial and execution, the disciples were seemingly resigned to accepting the grief that had overtaken them. The women among them, accustomed to attending to practical demands, had prepared spices for anointing Jesus' body, and headed for his tomb in the early morning. The men were slowly getting used to coping with their fear and grief, as victims of prejudice and persecution have done throughout the centuries. But, the expectations of all of them were jolted from the moment the women arrived at the tomb and saw the stone rolled away from the entrance. Moreover, when the women came back with the news given them by the two gleaming men who had greeted them in Jesus' empty tomb, reminding them that their teacher had done his best to prepare them for the surprise that had just startled them, the Apostles dismissed their message as nonsense, and Peter ran off to verify for himself whether or not they were suffering from hallucinations. The women had returned, buoyed up with hope, but their

stunningly good news was greeted with disbelief. This was Luke's way of demonstrating just how difficult it is for the new to break into people's lives, even into the lives of those who had walked with Jesus for three years.

On that very day, on a road leading to Emmaus and then over a meal in an inn, the Risen Jesus had made a second attempt to break into the lives of two other dispirited disciples. That experience had lifted them from grudging resignation, to the joy of recognising their Teacher in someone who had presented as a sympathetic stranger, and had left them, too, buoyed up with a hope that propelled them to come rushing back to the apostles with the incredible news of resurrection. As they shared their excitement of how they had recognised the Risen Jesus in the simple act of breaking bread, and sat listening to how Simon had discovered that the Master had been raised up, Jesus made a third attempt to convince them that his resurrection could be life-changing for them, too. In extending to them the gift of peace and forgiveness, he urged them to set aside their fears and doubts and to come forward to touch him, as proof positive that it was really he standing before them. In so doing, he promised them his Spirit, who, in due course, would empower them to let resurrection, new life loose in the world.

Embedded in these stories is a very clear message that the very first disciples who had been privileged with first-hand encounters with the Risen Jesus, struggled to allow even the possibility of resurrection to break into their living. It was as though they had been inoculated against the new, against change and transformation. Therein lies a message of hope for us. As this very moment in our history, we look around at a world and its people gripped and dispirited by a raging virus. We can see, too, how, over two thousand years since Christ was crucified, violence and hatred still hold sway in many places, how our Church has failed the very people whom it was meant to protect and, in the process, has all but lost its credibility. We can look at all this and begin to conclude that resurrection is still beyond our reach. BUT, Luke will not let us ignore the fact that it is at the very moment when we tell ourselves that hope is dead and buried and when we do the preparations to complete the burial, that the stirrings of new life are likely to be felt. Like the women at the start of chapter 24 in Luke, we might set out on pilgrimage to the tomb of our long-dead dreams, only to be disturbed by the rumblings of hope and resurrection breaking out from unexpected places. We meet a complete stranger who stops to engage us in the supermarket. We read of a small child who gives his prized sneakers to a new-found friend, because "that's what Jesus would do". Our hearts break open when we hear the very human, yet very divine question: "Do you have anything to eat here?" Perhaps some of the best places for us to understand ourselves and our role in the world and, indeed, to experience resurrection, are soup kitchen tables, budget cafe and family kitchen tables, where the people with whom we engage will mirror to us new insights and resurrection. When we stop to ponder the resurrection of Jesus, we might well discover that it is God's affirmation that the universe and all of creation matter, that love, integrity and justice matter, that all of us human beings, with our mystery, complexity and in-built contradictions, matter, for we have all been loved into life by God and are in God's image. We are all living proof of the Risen Christ's breaking into our lives and resuscitating us with resurrection. And that process must surely continue.