

## THE JOURNEY TO EMMAUS – SHATTERED DREAMS AND FRAYED HOPE

Acts 2: 14, 36-41 Psalm 116: 1-4, 12-19 | Peter 1: 17-23 Luke 24: 13-35

This Sunday's Gospel reading from Saint Luke is the familiar account of the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus. This story is both a literal and a spiritual journey. On the one hand, it recounts how two disciples who, after the crucifixion, death and resurrection of our Lord, walk seven miles from Jerusalem to their village of Emmaus. And on the other hand, it outlines for us the journey of grief that we all take: from denial - not recognizing Jesus, to understanding what the Scripture says about Him, to encountering and recognizing Him for who He is, and finally our own evidence of what we have experienced ourselves.

Grief has a way of disorienting us. The two travellers in the Gospel of Luke in chapter 24, seem to think that by getting out of Jerusalem maybe they could walk away from their grief, leave the bad memories of the previous Friday behind. Perhaps for them, Jerusalem had become a place where their dreams had died. Maybe they thought Emmaus would be the place to go to in order to find some solace. But as they walk on that road, again and again, their conversation kept going back to the death of the One they had loved, the One in whom they had hoped. Unmet expectations... shattered dreams, regret and defeat... These are emotions that we are all familiar with and therefore we are invited to step into the shoes of the two travellers and understand what little hope was left in them on that fateful day.

There are two phrases in today's Gospel which stand as anchors for this beautiful story: The first is:

“But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel...” and the second is:

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road...”

So here we have two people who are distressed and seem to be in a situation of disbelief, hitting the road, leaving their community behind, deep in confusion. Not only have they left the community, they don't place much faith in the testimony of the women who heard angels declaring Jesus alive. Other witnesses saw the empty tomb, but they did not see Jesus. Perhaps that is why the two are walking away.

Two things happen. Firstly, they are joined by a stranger -Jesus - on the road. He actually walks with them within their loss of hope and within their bewilderment. Secondly, he asks them to tell their story and he listens to them and he stays to have dinner with them in response to their simple words of invitation “stay with us”. Once Jesus and his companions are seated around the table, he takes bread, he blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. So small a thing. So small and yet it changes everything because this is what has been handed down to us and we enact this every time we celebrate the Eucharist.

It was during the last action of the breaking of the bread that the two disciples recognised Jesus. Some theologians suggest that it was not only the action of breaking the bread in itself that made them recognize him but that the two disciples finally could see, with their own eyes, the hands that were pierced by the nails of the crucifixion. Something that until that very movement, had remained hidden from them during the long journey on the road.

The most remarkable thing about this experience is that the man that the two had invited as a guest had now become their host! Here we see the profound meaning of the hospitality of God:

- A God who first bandages the wounds of bereavement and loss (When Jesus tells the story of salvation on the road, that perhaps helped them to understand later after the breaking of bread).
- A God who gives us freedom that he waits for us to open our hearts and invite him in, He does not impose. He does not force himself. He does not coerce. He’ll make as if he’s moving on, giving us the space, time, and freedom to decide what we really want. (Hence the simple invitation “stay with with us”).
- A God who reveals himself in the mundane and ordinary activities of our lives and turns those activities into powerful and transformative moments. Sharing a meal with family may be something small and routine and yet when that meal is shared with a stranger - a guest, the dining table becomes a transformed altar of worship because we begin to recognize our common humanity in the one who is invited as a guest. In Northern Sotho we say “Moeng etla ka gešu re je ka wena” simply translated “visitor or guest, come to our home so that we may share a meal through your presence”.

This too is a deeply biblical invitation: in 1 Peter 4: 9 he charges the people: “Be hospitable to one another without complaining” Thus Jesus, the guest becomes the host!

During these harsh days of sheltering in our homes, perhaps hearing stories of death and suffering, and fearing for our own future as individuals, as families, as communities, and as a nation, it’s difficult to trust in the transformative power of small things. The sharing of a story, the breaking of bread and sharing a meal around a common table.

But the Emmaus story speaks to this power — God shows up during a quiet evening walk. God is made known around our dinner tables. God reveals God’s self when we take, bless, break, and give. God is present in the mundane rhythms and rituals of our seemingly ordinary days.

If the Emmaus story tells us anything, it is that the risen Christ is not confined in any way by the smallness of our lives, our shattered dreams. So we keep sending those WhatsApp messages to our lonely neighbours and relatives who we can’t visit at this time. We keep sharing our stories of hope with the disheartened, those whose hope is perhaps frayed. We keep worshipping as we do right now over Zoom, over YouTube, over facebook, so that we too can proclaim the Word of Christ to the world. We keep honouring the stranger with tiny acts of kindness. Finally we keep attending to our burning hearts so that we may tell others how our hearts were set on fire when we first encountered the living Christ.

Glory to God whose power, resting in us, can do infinitely more than we can ever ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.