

Woody Allen once said: *"Our civilization stands at the crossroads. Down one road is despondency and despair. Down the other road is total annihilation. I hope we'll take the right road."* He was obviously trying to be funny, but, you know, his statement reflects the despair and pessimism of our times.

The two despondent disciples walking the road to Emmaus summed up the situation very neatly when they said, *"We had hoped that he would be the one who was going to set Israel free!"* All they had hope for seemed to be over and gone. For the previous few years life had been exciting, in the vibrant, inspirational company of Jesus, the prophet and healer. Now he was gone.

We can empathise with them, because mostly we too forget or we fail to take seriously the promises of the Lord. He promised that he would be there for us, that he would never abandon us in the storm, that he would walk every step of the road with us, and that he would bring us safely to the Promised Land of the Father.

The Emmaus story is a living paradigm for Christian discipleship. It strongly suggests that if we travel life's journey with others, sharing our faith and our doubts with them, Christ will be with us, opening our minds to the truth. Just as he gave Cleopas and his chum deeper insight, so he does for all who listen to him. His promise remains, *"I am with you, always!"* In the early years of the Church they also had many proofs of his powerful presence, as Acts illustrates by various miracle stories. Look at Peter's healing powers when he called on Jesus' name. Not only is the crippled man cured, he jumps up, begins to walk about, and then enters the temple with them, *"leaping and praising God."* The people's awe and amazement gives Peter a chance to explain the source of his healing gift: he has it from the risen Christ, now more even powerfully effective than he was during his mortal life.

Notice too, how Jesus used the Holy Scriptures to enlighten the two friends as they walked, because word of God is empowered as by an electric current, inspired and shot through with the Spirit of God. With God's word comes the power to respond to that word, and to carry it out.

In truth, we are all on an Emmaus journey, a *camino* or pilgrimage of faith. We may be perplexed by events in our own lives: disappointments, loss of a job, failure, collapse of a relationship, shattered dreams, betrayal by friends. We are certainly very, very deeply disturbed by things that are happening in Church and State. We are deeply disturbed by the lack of peace in our world, the injustices of society, worries about the future. Everything, indeed, may seem very, very dark. And we may feel as helpless and as hopeless as those two disciples did.

If so, we need community. We cannot fight depression alone. We cannot make sense of things alone. We need to lean on one another for support. We need to search the Scriptures together to see what answers they may have for us. And **then** we can go out and spread this good news.

Have you noticed how we tend to walk away from situations and places that have painful associations for us. Sometimes that can be the right thing to do, but perhaps not always. In the case of our two disciples, they were walking away from Jerusalem, where the Lord had wanted them to remain.

Although they didn't realize it at the time, not only was Jerusalem the city where Jesus was put to death; it was also the city where he was raised from the dead and it would be the city where the risen Lord would pour out his Holy Spirit upon the disciples, the city from which his message would begin to be spread to the world. The Lord journeyed with these two disciples to help them to see that there was more to the city of Jerusalem than they realized. It is often the case in our own lives that the places we try to get away from, are actually where God is mysteriously but powerfully at work in the darkness.

Notice too how it was in the breaking of bread that they recognised Jesus. Breaking of bread among friends is a living symbol of friendship and belonging. What was so special about the way Jesus broke the bread? Perhaps it was the whole atmosphere of self-giving that he invested in the act that revealed to them who he really was. There was a level of sincerity, of giving, of sharing, of sacredness that was unique to Jesus, and which they had experienced on previous occasions. This unique something

touched their deepest hungers, and the nourishment provided was no longer just a physical thing. It was food that required them to open their hearts as well as their mouths to receive. *“He took bread, blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them.”*

“The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.” Helen Keller

Or, as Shakespeare would have it *“Go to your bosom; Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know.”* (Measure for Measure)

For:

“The heart has reasons which the reason cannot understand.” Blaise Pascal

The theologian Jonathan Edwards wrote that we know God through a *“sense of the heart”*. Because, for him, knowledge of God includes our whole being, includes our heart as well as our head.

What’s interesting about the story is that they didn’t immediately recognize Jesus, but when he took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them, their eyes are opened to recognize him for who he truly is. After Jesus left them, they turned to each other and said, *“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”* When we want to talk about something or someone we know truly or deeply, we often resort to the language of the heart.

“Were not our hearts burning within us?” There you have the sense of the heart. The disciples really didn’t get it until they grasped it with their hearts. It’s not just knowing about the events that took place. It’s not even just knowing about the scriptures. It’s knowing about them in a way in which their hearts were burning within them. It’s this type of knowledge, this sense of the heart, that transformed them and allowed them to see who their travelling companion really was. It is the sense of the heart that allows **us** to recognize the Lord in **our** midst.

In the Eucharist, as we break bread and share it, what has been is fused with what will be. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is not just history. It is not

just some arcane mystery of faith to which we as Christians must give our assent. It is attested and experienced anew in each Eucharist we share.

Medieval theologians made a fine science of explaining the presence of Christ upon the altar in the Eucharist and using complicated philosophical terms such as substance, accident, and transubstantiation to explain the inexplicable, to capture and codify this deepest of mysteries at the centre of our life in Christ. Many later scholars rejected their conjectures, but there can be no mistaking the near-universal belief among Christians of all ages that Christ is somehow alive and well and with us still in the food and drink we share in communion with each other and with him.

One of the most wonderful things to come out of the resurrection is what we learn about Jesus: that, no matter how bad things become for us, no matter where we go to hide ourselves when the world gets to be too much for us, even if we lose our faith for a time, he will come to be with us. He won't ask us for explanations, we won't have to justify our position, and there will be no recriminations. He will simply meet us as we walk, each of us along our own road to Emmaus.

God has not changed in 2000 years. Our God is still an Emmaus God. A God who encounters us along the path through life, the road to wherever is our existence is taking us. The gift of faith is recognizing that presence and having that recognition shape and guide our lives. All the ingredients of the Christian life are here in this story.

It was a stranger who offered a listening ear, solace for their pain and suffering, and a new understanding of the scriptures. And it was a stranger who accepted their hospitality of a meal and lodging. It was at the table, when the stranger broke the bread, blessed and broke it that they recognized Jesus, and understood what he had told them on the road.

On our journeys we encounter friends, family, and strangers. Are we alert to Christ's presence in each? Are we open to new understandings of God's love that others can bring us? Are we hospitable, willing to share what we have with others? Do we share God's gift of Jesus, the resurrected Christ, in our encounters with others?

The risen Christ journeys with us through life, even when we do not recognize him. Just as the two on the road to Emmaus experienced the risen Christ, we too are interrupted by Jesus, often in the guise of a stranger calling us to serve as Christ did. Our recognition of the Christ and the call may be slow in coming, but once recognition takes place we must move forward with a strong and determined faith. The resurrected Christ is with us on our journey!

When we walk with God, we enter the dimension where God unfolds the secrets of his kingdom. These are the paths that the ancients trod before us. Enoch walked with God for 300 years and was taken off to heaven. Noah knew the secret of walking with God as did Abraham. Through Christ, we can explore the glorious riches of knowing God like they did—and to even a greater degree because of the Spirit which has been given to us!