

Sermon Sunday 23 April 2023 – Richard Shreeve

May the words of my lips be acceptable to you O Lord and that hearts and minds be opened to receive your precious words Amen

On Monday and Wednesday I play golf with the senior section at the Wergs Golf Club. A few years ago about 30 of us turned up for the Wednesday competition. It was a glorious day, warm sunshine and very little breeze: the course was in perfect condition. Ideal for a good competitive game. There were some very good low scores posted that day but Paul had the best of all playing 10 shots under his handicap. Paul was a very likeable person and nobody begrudged him his win. He had a pint afterwards to celebrate his win and then went home with a big smile on his face.

You can imagine our shock when later that day we heard that Paul had arrived home safely but had collapsed as he got out of his car and died of a heart attack. We could not believe it, he was only in his fifty's. He had been full of life but now we would never see or play golf with him again, He would be sorely missed.

Any of you here today may have possibly had a similar experience, and can understand how the disciples felt on that first Easter Sunday Morning. They were scared, distressed and demoralised. They had been with Jesus for three years and witnessed all that he had done. Only seven days previously they had walked with him as he triumphally rode on a donkey into Jerusalem welcomed by a great crowd only to see him nailed on a cross a few short days later.

Now the women had gone to the tomb early and found it empty except for two men dressed in white who gave them a message. They returned from the tomb and repeated the message they had been given by the two men that had appeared to them in the empty tomb saying "The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again." The disciples do not believe the women because their words seemed to them like nonsense. The disciples were not highly educated men and they ran off to see for themselves. Peter looked in the tomb and went away wondering what had happened. If we heard that message for the first time today we would probably have thought the same. Jesus would later rebuke them for not believing.

The appeal of the Emmaus story is that it talks about where most of us live. There are no revelations, no great Saints, no exotic places, or people. The Emmaus story is about ordinary everyday despair and Monday-morning drudgery. It is about bumping into a stranger, about sitting down at a table, and about sharing a meal. It is about a couple of unknown followers of Jesus who are walking along a dusty road. Their conversation is full of despair, discouragement, and disappointment. Life is a burden and does not live up to its promises.

Then they meet a stranger. He asks them about their conversation and they recite their woes. In many ways, their conversation could be ours: the everyday stuff, the children, the economy, world crisis' all around us like the COVID 19 pandemic, the war, the price of energy or toilet paper, school, job and so on. These are the threads of the daily fabric of our lives. Then the two men go deeper, they say we were hoping for answers to their questions. The same thing we all hope for as we move through life...where is God? Does my life count? Does anything make sense?

Why am I so sick? Why this accident or death of a loved one? Why don't I feel that God is with me? I could put up with anything if I could feel the presence of God; if I only knew that He cared and heard prayers. The Emmaus story picks up on the lives of all of us; we are all on the road of life. Some just beginning their journey while some are in the middle and others near the end. Along the way there are times of joy and times of sadness. We win a few and lose a few. We enjoy the company of family and friends. We despair when bad people win and the good suffer and, like those disciples, we say we were hoping for a God of justice and compassion to make sense of it all.

Then suddenly into this mess comes God, the stranger with the holes in His hands who shares food and Himself. That is the point of the story-God is here. He penetrates our everyday life, but we do not always know it. Just as those two disciples, going into Emmaus finally recognized the risen Christ, not in some fabulous technicolour explosion, but in the simple breaking of the bread...a Eucharist moment. They remind us that God is in our lives, although we do not realise this all of the time.

Jesus showed himself to his disciples and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days during this time he had opened their minds so that they could understand the scriptures. On one occasion when he was eating with them he told them not to leave Jerusalem but wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit His father had promised them. He told them that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. On the fortieth day the disciples went with Jesus to the slopes of the Mount of Olives and saw Jesus taken up to heaven. The disciples returned to Jerusalem to wait for the day of Pentecost. During this time Peter told the disciples that he had to choose some to replace Judas. It was necessary that it should be one of the men who had been with them from the beginning. Either Joseph called Barsabbas and Matthias They prayed to the Lord show them which one of the two he had Chosen and then they cast lots and the lot fell to Matthias.

In today's reading from Acts we have moved on from that first Easter Sunday.

It is the day of Pentecost ten days on from the Ascension and 50 days after feast of the Passover. The disciples have been filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues as the Spirit had enabled them to. Peter no longer that frightened person who had previously denied knowing Jesus three times, boldly stood up with the eleven and began to preach to thousands of Jews from many different countries each hearing in their own language

These are the final verses of Peters sermon and we see the first and immediate results of Peter's proclamation of that Gospel message.

After Peter's proclamation that they crucified Jesus. (Here Peter means they did nothing to prevent it) his listeners are "cut to the heart", deeply moved and shaken, they sincerely ask what they should do. It reflects both their belief in what they have just heard about Jesus, and regret over their former rejection.

They are told to "repent". Repentance was important in the message of the forerunner, John the Baptist, in the preaching of Jesus, and in the directions Jesus left just before his ascension

'Repentance' implies not just regret for the past but, much more positively, a radical change to one's way of thinking and behaving. It translates the Greek word *metanoia* of which the nearest English translation is something like 'conversion', a turning around to a completely new way of seeing life. This they pledge through being baptised and having their former sins forgiven and left behind, and receiving the gift of the Spirit.

Each of the great apostolic addresses in Acts finishes with a call to conversion, leading to full reconciliation with God.

This is in fulfilment of the promises made by God in the past, and extended not only to the Jewish people but also "for all those who are far away". We are told that on that very day – the day of Pentecost – 3,000 people became followers of Jesus the Lord. Luke always likes to note the Church's numerical growth and does so several times in the Acts.

A reading like this is a call for all of us to renew our own commitment and to make the necessary conversion to bring us closer to Christ and the Gospel. It is also a reminder for us to share the Easter message with others. We may not have the same response that Peter got, but if we all brought one person to Christ what a difference it would make to their lives – and ours! Amen