HOMILY FOR SUNDAY EASTER 3 YEAR A

30 APRIL 2017 ST BENET’S HALL

In today’s justly famous gospel passage, St Luke, the master narrator and inspired historian of the New Testament, gives us a resurrection account to shape and to nourish our Easter faith, to help us to understand how we like the first disciples may come to Easter faith through word (‘did not our hearts burn within us’) and sacrament (‘then they recognised him in the breaking of the bread’) through faith and the sacraments of faith.

It is an account which has understandably inspired some of the most extraordinary Easter art of the Renaissance and the Baroque, the work, for example, of Caravaggio, the immensely hot tempered and troubled artist of genius, or of Rembrandt. Great and wonderful these paintings most certainly are. Both artists produced more than one Emmaus painting. Both present us with utterly compelling and strongly symbolic representations of the end-moment of recognition, the electrifying, wholly energising moment in which the tired, disillusioned and discouraged eyes of the two disciples, Cleopas and his companion, see in the breaking of the bread what they so strangely but persistently failed to see before that moment, namely that the one before them is the risen Christ. Arms are thrust outwards, they start to stand in shock, their faces show an astonished recognition as they look at the risen Christ and hold him in their sight.

Wonderful art, and the artists use legitimate licence, but still they are not quite right. Not quite right because what the master storyteller actually tells us is that in the very moment that their eyes were opened and they recognised their companion for who he was, in that very moment he entirely vanished from their sight. Yes, the two disciples are astounded and amazed, yes their tired downcast eyes are wonderfully lit up and they are impelled back to Jerusalem with their story to tell. But they are not looking at the risen Jesus before them; St Luke says ‘and they recognised him, but he had vanished from their sight’. They are, in fact, looking at broken bread. Just as we do. Just as we do in every Mass. The great mystery of this story is that it begins with the disciples failing to recognise Jesus and, when, they do recognise him, it ends with him immediately vanishing from their sight.

This is their and our experience of sacrament, in which they and we may see and know, by as it were a gift of insight, the risen Christ. It was for them as it also is for us preceded by an experience of the Word, by a slow process of dawning understanding, by a process we might say of reading the Scripture, of lectio divina, as it is often known, particularly in the monastic tradition. So in our gospel, the two disciples, Cleopas and his companion, after the crucifixion are walking away from Jerusalem, very disconsolate. The risen Jesus comes and starts walking with them, but their eyes are kept from recognising him. It is often so. Often in our prayer, as we know only too well, Jesus is an unfelt and unsensed presence. We are far from recognising him. They tell him their woes. He is quite rough with them (reading and praying the Bible can have quite a puncturing effect on us) ‘You foolish men … so slow to believe’. Then we are told that Jesus ‘starting with Moses and going through all the prophets … explained to them the passages throughout the Scriptures which were about himself’. Today for us our modern Bibles with their accompanying notes can help us to deepen our understanding and to follow God’s Word through the paths it is taking us. Then there is a punchline. Afterwards, after they have recognised Jesus in the breaking of the bread and he has vanished from the sight, they remember their shared lectio and they say ‘Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?’ Jesus may be a presence unseen, unfelt, but we may find still that our hearts have ‘burned within us’ and that we recognise him in the breaking of the bread. My point obviously is that St Luke is doing more than telling us an Easter story; he is helping us to enter into the truth of the resurrection experience, how we may recognise Christ and see, most likely in retrospect, that our lives and hearts have been deeply touched.

St Gregory the Great in the late 6th century, a great practitioner of this way of prayer, calls this touching of our lives and hearts by the Word, an inner song, a slight murmur, a silent word – obviously he is using a poetic vocabulary and a paradoxical language, but still he is pointing to an experience which can still be ours and which is certainly part of our Christian inheritance. This is not a practice and an experience which is the exotic possession of a few highly chosen souls. Though a great such as St Gregory writes of it and in an exalted way, nonetheless this sort of prayer survives through to our own day because it is available for all and is in fact the opposite of an arcane practice. So St Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians (2:9) quoting Isaiah chapter 64: ‘It is as Scripture says: What no eye has seen and no ear has heard, what the mind of man cannot visualise; all that God has prepared for those who love him’. He has prepared this for all those who love him, even you and me.

The patient, hard work, of prayerful reading of the Scripture, activates at a deeper level than eye can see, ear hear, or tongue speak a love and a knowledge of the things of God, a love and a knowledge of God. It is a secret as St Paul suggests in his letter to the Colossians: the secret is Christ within us, our hope of glory (1:27). And the Lord himself compares the Kingdom, namely God himself, to a secret treasure hidden in a field (Matthew 13:44).

It is just the way any reading at Mass or in our private reading, can seize hold of our attention, or our minds and hearts. Sometimes our hearts burn within us, but sometimes we just feel very dry and empty and quite discouraged. And if at times we do seem to recognise and our hearts do burn within us, this is just as yet a foreshadowing of our destiny, which is the journey’s end beyond the frame of this life, just as the arms of the disciple in Caravaggio’s painting push out, beyond the frame or canvass of the art, reaching for all that God has prepared for those who love him. We walk a road and it may be for us that God takes it and makes it a road to Emmaus; as today’s psalmist, quoted also in the first reading from Acts, said: ‘You will show me the path of life, the fullness of joy in your presence’.