

3rd Sunday of Easter A “The Road to Emmaus”

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A little bible study today! Have you ever wondered what the celebration of the Mass looked like in the first century? My friends, I think we get a good glimpse of what the Mass looked like for the earliest Christians in our Gospel reading today. What do I mean by this?

We start our Gospel reading with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. One of them is named Cleopas and the other is unnamed. Two observations here: The first observation is that whenever you have unnamed characters in the bible, we are immediately to read ourselves into the story, to become that character in the bible and see how this reflects our spiritual journey. Secondly, these disciples were on the road to Emmaus. If you look at a map, you will notice that these disciples were going the wrong way. The other disciples were in Jerusalem. The road to Emmaus takes our two disciples away from Jerusalem and in the opposite direction from the Church. The two disciples were going the wrong way. How does this relate to the Mass?

At the beginning of Mass, we begin with what we call the penitential rite. We begin with recognizing the sinful areas in our life that need cleansing and we ritualize this need for cleansing by either praying the Kyrie prayer (Lord, have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy) or by the sprinkling rite, washing ourselves with the sprinkling of Holy Water. It has been explained to me once that the penitential rite of Mass can be compared to watering a plant that hasn't been watered for awhile. If you just try to water a plant that hasn't been watered awhile the water just flows over the hardened dry soil and doesn't reach the roots of the plant.

The penitential rite is like inviting God's fingers into the hardened soil around our hearts, to loosen up the soil so that God's life giving water of the Word and Eucharist can reach the roots of our hearts, nourishing our souls. Our two disciples begin our story going in the wrong direction and they encounter Jesus who loosens the soil around their hearts. What happens next?

The Gospel says the disciples didn't recognize Jesus. And this is what the Mass helps us to do, to remember who Jesus is, what he did for us, and how this matters in our lives. The Gospel says Jesus interpreted for them, beginning with Moses and the Prophets, everything that referred to Jesus in Sacred Scripture. And so what happens after the Penitential Rite at Mass? You guessed it, the Liturgy of the Word. And that is what happens in our story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. After what can be construed as a penitential rite symbolized by going the wrong direction and inability to recognize Jesus, Jesus becomes proclaimed in the remembrance of Sacred Scripture including a homily. What happens next?

Well, the Gospel says that it was getting late and the disciples urged him to stay with them. And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them. And so, what happens after the Liturgy of the Word? You guessed it, the liturgy of the Eucharist. It says when Jesus gave them the bread, their eyes were opened and they recognized him but he vanished from their sight. Why did Jesus vanish from their sight when he gave them the bread? He vanished because the earliest Christians believed that Jesus Christ is fully present in the Eucharist. Do you see that here? And so we have a remarkable glimpse here in the Gospel of Luke what the earliest Christians celebration of Mass looked like on the road to Emmaus. We have a penitential rite, we have the liturgy of the word, we have the liturgy of the Eucharist, and we have Jesus truly present in the Eucharist. What happens next?

It says our two disciples turn around and go back to Jerusalem. They go back to St. Peter and the other disciples. They go back to the apostolic Church. And this is what happens during the Mass doesn't it? At the end of Mass, when the priest says "go in peace" we are invited to go out into the world, glorifying the Lord with our lives. What is therefore the most important symbol the church offers? You guessed it, the exit sign. Once we are purified, grown in discipleship, and received Christ's body and blood, we are to become Christ to the world as part of his apostolic Church. Do you find this interesting? I sure do. What this Gospel reading tells us is that the way we worship dates back to the very beginning of the Church.

And so, do we dare? My friends, do we dare welcome Jesus into our hearts in the breaking of the bread? Do we dare allow ourselves to become Christ in the manner by which we live our lives? Do we dare allow ourselves to be transformed on the road we travel through life? Do we dare allow Jesus to accompany us in life, even if we are going the wrong way? If we have wandered far from the Apostolic Church, do we dare take up the invitation to return? My friends, there are many directions we can travel in this life. The Gospel calls us to consider, which direction should we be going?