

Divine Presence

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, Lower Hutt Parish, April 30th 2017

Keynote Bible passage: Luke 24.13 – 35

‘The story of Easter is the story of God’s wonderful window of divine surprises.’ That’s how it was on those first days following Jesus’ rising again. An empty tomb, much to the women’s amazement, Mary in the garden meets one she thinks is the gardener, and it’s Jesus, Thomas the one who doubted, praises the risen Jesus, ‘My Lord and my God.’

From this morning’s gospel, there’s the two disciples meeting a stranger on the road, and we know what happened in that unexpected encounter. Luke records it happening on the afternoon of the day of resurrection. For us it’s two weeks on. I draw attention to this event as the theme of the sermon is: ‘*Divine Presence*’, and it’s my conviction that such continues to occur. There’s times when it is likely we are aware. Think for a moment in the Service there’s the Response: ‘The Lord is here. God’s Spirit is with us’. Or we may be like ones who Jesus refers to” ‘Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.’ There’s these times when we may be especially aware, and these I’d like to refer to in how they can occur – in at least four ways.

1) First, in the *praise of God*. There’s been numbers of occasions it has seemed to me that angels, heavenly beings are joining in our worship. After all, what do we express when we acknowledge in the service. ‘Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven we praise you.....’ In the singing of hymns and songs that’s really what’s happening. Somehow the praise is more full. Its been like that especially with the singing of Handel’s Messiah, and as it comes to an end: ‘Worthy is the Lamb to receive glory and honour and power’ and the final ‘Amen’ chorus. That sends shivers down my spine.

At other times the praise is said, and it really was like that at All Saints back on Easter Day – in the affirmation: ‘Christ is risen! And the response: ‘He is risen indeed’. As I heard the response when up front, it seemed stronger than only those of the congregation present.

2) Second, I describe as ‘*presence of mind*.’ That’s a phrase that is uttered when something unexpected and good occurs. That’s how it was for those disciples of the resurrection. Think of Peter with the 7 fishing early in the morning, and they’ve so far caught no fish The ‘stranger’ on the beach suggested they throw the net to the other side, and guess what...! Then Peter exclaims, ‘It is the Lord! Similarly with Thomas’ extraordinary exclamation after his convinced scepticism when they’d told him Jesus had risen, ‘My Lord and my God’. It was what one might describe as ‘Divine prompting. (Just like earlier when Peter testified Jesus was the ‘Messiah’ and Jesus said that wasn’t human insight but given by God.)

So do such occur for us today? I believe so, time and again. Let me share two examples from my recent holiday up to the Waikato. My car has one of those locking devices when if the doors are shut after a time they automatically lock. That’s all very well – if one hasn’t left the key somewhere in the car. Well I did just that, having opened and then shut the boot. Then while sitting in my cabin I’m totally sure it was ‘presence of mind’ that made me realise the door could have locked – and what a hassle to get the spare key from home. I rushed out and retrieved the key! All the while saying a short prayer, ‘thank you God.’ A second was early in the morning and

near the holiday park is a stream with swimming holes. I determined to go and have an early morning dip. Only I didn't realise till going there, it was a frost! Then I was aware of a divine expression of glory and beauty, with mist arising from the stream lit by the golden rays of the rising sun. I found myself singing in my mind that spiritual 'Down to the river' (sung by the musicians a few weeks back). It was surely a 'lived moments' as someone has expressed such experiences. I'm sure there are times, many, where we have such Divine prompting, or 'Presence of mind' to say or do or be aware of something quite significant. Again an appropriate response a simple prayer, 'thank you God.'

3) Thirdly, *strangers walk with us*. That was the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. My thought here is that as we remember Jesus' own promise of dwelling in us 'Abide in me and I in you', so it happens in these days. Think how many times there's been someone who comes into your life at a critical time, and is there for you in your time of need. That may be in encouraging, comforting, mentoring, consoling....

Likewise, surely you can think of times where 'Christ in you' has been there for another in their time of need. One is reminded of the song, 'We are pilgrims on a journey, and companions on the road, we are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load....I will weep when you are weeping, when you laugh I'll laugh with you, I will share your joy and sorrow till we've seen this journey through....' Such insight comes directly from St Paul's own teaching, and no doubt experience. Strangers? No, it can be 'Divine Presence.'

4) Fourthly, the theme of the day is '*Resurrection community*' and the Sentence: 'They told how Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.' Thus *Divine Presence in Holy Communion*. This sacrament of the bread and the cup is a very sacred action and *timeless*. Words recall the past 'On the night before he died, Jesus took bread....and.. after supper he took the cup...' Then there's the timeless words of Jesus: 'Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you...' and of the wine: 'Drink this, all of you....' For me this is a very sacred part of the worship.

There's a further element of this timelessness in words sometimes included at the conclusion of this action. St Paul in his letter to the Corinthians observed, 'Every time you eat this bread and drink of the cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.' Thus, past, present and future are melded into a timeless eternal event. For me it is a special privilege to be able to repeat these words of Jesus and have you share in this. In giving the bread and the cup it is so very a sacred action. Again here is the reality of Divine Presence.

Finally may I share a short reflection on the Emmaus road experience written by a sister of a religious community: 'The road to Emmaus is not a road of the past. It is an everyday road. Someone is still walking along beside us, explaining the scriptures to us, breaking bread with us, and then vanishing from our sight. And we are rather slow about recognising what's happening in the breaking of the bread, and that's because we're slow about trusting. We long to recognise Christ, before we trust that stranger He send down our road, and soften we miss the blessing. It is not that we're on the wrong road. It is rather that we fail to trust and recognise strangers. The road we walk each day.....is the road to Emmaus'. (Sr Macrina Wiederkehr]

Concluding, let us return to the prayer of the day: 'O God, your Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of the bread open the eyes of our faith, that we may see him in his redeeming work.' Amen.