

Jesus stood among them

Luke 24: 36b-48, Acts 3:12-19

Les Baird, 22 April 2012

A time of despair

In today's gospel story, we see the disciples of Jesus gathered in a room, uncertain, bewildered, hearing strange stories that they couldn't make sense of. Just 2 days before, their leader, Jesus, had been killed. Here was Andrew, who had given up an stable job as a fisherman to walk the dusty streets following the one they called the master, hoping to have some part in making the world a better place. Here was John, who was there, who had seen that terrible crucifixion, who had stood by in despair during the 3 hours of darkness. Here in this room was Peter, who the night before Jesus' crucifixion, while Jesus was being interrogated by the Jewish authorities, had said to a servant-girl, I don't know the man! He did this not once, but again, and an hour later a third time. Here was Thomas, whose despair had already led him into a kind of blind stumbling loyalty, mingled with a great deal of love. - Let us also go, that we may die with him, John 11:16. Here were James and John whose mother just a week or two ago had come to Jesus with that embarrassing request – let my two sons sit on each side of you, in the positions of honour, in your coming kingdom! Well, what kingdom?

Now they are being further confused. They had heard from some women that they had gone to the tomb and found it empty and heard that puzzling word of the angels "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Peter too, had gone there and had seen the tomb with the wrapping of Jesus' body.

And here are two friends of theirs who have just arrived with an amazing story. They were walking to a nearby town, and they say that Jesus came and walked with them. They were so excited about this that instead of staying at their home there, they immediately returned to Jerusalem to tell the disciples.

An unexpected visitor

As they were discussing what they had been hearing, puzzling, wondering, in the simple words of Luke – Jesus himself stood among them! And of course, they don't believe it – they still think it is some kind of metaphysical experience they are having. So Jesus seeks to assure them that he is truly a living person – by taking food from them and eating it.

He also moves to confirm his identity to them – he was the one who had been with them for the last 3 years, leading, teaching, opening their eyes to a new understanding of God and of life. He was the one who had been put to death on a cross by the Romans – he showed them his wounds to affirm that.

Did Andrew then remember the mysterious man who had called him away from his fishing nets with the words “follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Did Peter perhaps remember then, not just his shame from that evil night, but the time when Jesus said “***The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.***” Perhaps James and John then remembered climbing the hill with Jesus and John and Peter and seeing Jesus transformed, shining white, meeting with Moses and Elijah.

Jesus reminds them of how he predicted his death and resurrection. As he did with the 2 people on the road to Emmaus, he explains all this to them in terms of the Old Testament – the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms – these representing all 3 traditional divisions of the Hebrew Bible.

The disciples now, having come to a faltering belief coupled with a profoundly hopeful joy, are given a challenge by Jesus – a message for the world. Luke’s words paralleling what in Matthew has become known as the great commission – go therefore and make disciples of all nations. And at the heart of the message is this – repentance and forgiveness of sins.

This message of repentance and forgiveness is to be proclaimed in His name, in the name of Jesus, the Messiah he tells them.

Meeting the challenge

Now our Acts reading takes us out of that closed room, to a gathering outside the temple in Jerusalem -

And here are Peter and John who had gone to the temple to pray, and having encountered there a chronically disabled man who was regularly carried in to beg, they command him to be healed in the name of Jesus. This healing caused rather a commotion in the crowd, and here is Peter, speaking boldly to an uncertain and puzzled crowd that had gathered.

Peter makes it clear that it wasn’t some magic trick that Peter and John had performed but what they had seen at work here was the power of God - the God that they worshipped, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of their ancestors. But this power was being released through the name of Jesus, who God raised from the dead, through faith in His name.

And here is Peter, telling the people what Jesus had told him and the other disciples in that room, that this is just what the prophets had told them to expect. Peter too is calling them to repent, and to turn to God so that they can obtain forgiveness.

Here then, are the disciples carrying out Jesus' instructions to them, beginning at Jerusalem, at the heart of Jewish thinking and belief, the temple in Jerusalem, and proclaiming the message that Jesus has been raised from the dead and that forgiveness is available to those who repent and have faith in him.

Changing the world

What happened that day in Jerusalem totally changed the expectations of Andrew, of Thomas, of Peter, of the other disciples. They were taken out of fear and apprehension and given peace. They were taken out of regret and guilt and were given forgiveness. They were taken out of bewilderment and helplessness and made people of power - here is John healing a cripple, here is Peter speaking to the crowd and accusing them of putting Jesus to death.

This happened as a result of Jesus breaking into their situation – Jesus himself stood among them. The risen Christ still offers us peace, and forgiveness, and the power to work in his name. Sometimes, he comes and walks with us for a while, sometimes he seems to break into our lives. Sometimes, we misunderstand, or are slow to recognise him. But if we welcome him the power that released the disciples from their fear and helplessness can work in our lives, our Church, our community, our world!

Alleluia! Christ is risen.