

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE – THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

INTRODUCTION

In today's Gospel, we witness a powerful and mysterious encounter between the Risen Christ and two unsuspecting disciples walking the 7-odd weary miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. So energised are they when they finally recognise Jesus that they walk straight back again to share the news!



That may be a little more than our daily allowance of exercise currently, but let us begin this time of worship by praying quietly that we will recognise God's presence with us now, and be both comforted and energised by hearing Him speak to us.

OPENING BIBLE VERSE AND PRAYER

“Through Christ you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.”

(1 Peter 1:21)

Thank you, God, for the things which make us smile.

Thank you for them all!

Thank you for the things which make us feel good.

Thank you for them all!

Thank you for the things which refresh us.

Thank you for them all!

Thank you for the things which inspire and excite us.

Thank you for them all!

Thank you for the things which remind us we are loved.

Thank you for them all!

Give thanks to God, for He is good.

His love lasts for ever!

Give thanks for the gift of Jesus.

His love lasts for ever!

Give thanks for His gift of forgiveness.

His love lasts for ever!

Give thanks for the promise of His presence.

His love lasts for ever!

Lord, have mercy.

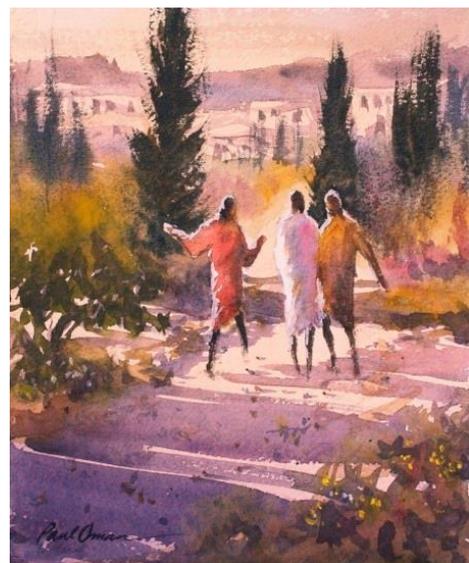
Christ, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

GOSPEL READING

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad.

Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him."



Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.



REFLECTION

"Keep your distance!!"

I suspect that, for many of us, one of our most enduring memories of this period of lockdown will be summed up in the loaded expression: SOCIAL DISTANCING.

If your experience has been anything like mine, being deprived of the opportunity simply to be near to family, friends, even people you meet on the

streets, will have made you painfully aware of just how important a part of life those simple social interactions really are. How much poorer life feels without them!

Nowhere has this been driven home for me more clearly than at funerals. The urge to shake hands or give someone a hug is so strong. Words alone cannot replace those simple but profound gestures.

Now of course it is absolutely right and proper that we observe the social distancing rules, both for our own protection and for the safety of others and the safeguarding of healthcare staff. But having to keep our distance is bringing home to us all just how much we depend in our normal lives on the comfort and security that comes from closeness with others.

There is a specifically Christian dimension to this. Because one of the key messages of Christian faith is that **GOD DOES NOT KEEP HIS DISTANCE FROM US**. As Saint Augustine put it so powerfully in his *Confessions*, "God is closer to us than we are to ourselves".

This is what we see so clearly in Jesus, who after all was given the name "Immanu-El", God-with-us. He lived as one of us, choosing the path of solidarity with us. He got up close and personal with people, eating with them, touching them to heal and to bless. In his death, he got as close to us in our deepest needs as it is possible to get. And in his resurrection life, he continues to do the same, getting close to people.

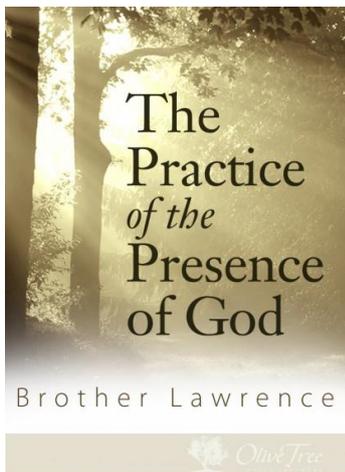
As he does with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They are angry and confused because of his death and the strange reports that he has been sighted, very much alive again. Jesus comes alongside them, and walks with them, helping them to understand that everything that has happened was part of God's breathtaking but mysterious plan. And for most of the time they don't recognise him.

What a picture there of the spiritual life! God has said he will never leave us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6). Jesus said, "I am with you always" (Matthew



28:20). And yet most Christians, I suspect, spend most of their lives wondering where God has disappeared to! So I would say that a large part of the Christian life is about discovering and living out the reality that God truly is with us always – closer to us than we are to ourselves.

In one of the most cherished works of Christian writing, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, the seventeenth century French monk Brother Lawrence described how he learnt to fill every moment of his life with an awareness of the presence of God. He did this, not only or even especially in times of formal 'worship', but in everything, whether cleaning pots and pans in the kitchen, taking a walk, talking with a colleague, or getting washed in the morning. This was no super-spiritual, holier-than-thou practice – "too spiritually-minded to be any earthly good". No, he found that every part of every day was sacred – because God was in it. God **is** in it.



For Brother Lawrence, one of the keys to cultivating this awareness of God's constant presence was simply to talk to Him as often as possible, not with lengthy or formal prayers, but naturally. "Since you are not unaware that God is present before you whatever you are doing, that he is at the depth and centre of your soul, why not then pause from time to time at least from that which occupies you outwardly... to worship Him inwardly, to praise Him, petition Him, to offer Him your heart and thank Him?"

Whatever else you do during this lockdown, may I commend to you to try to follow something of Brother Lawrence's example. As you go about your daily business, whether working from home, doing housework, having a cup of tea, whatever, pause for just a moment every so often to remember that God is right there with you, and to offer Him whatever is on your heart or mind, whether seemingly good or bad. If you stick at it, you may find that little by little, what previously seemed so ordinary is transformed into something very sacred by being filled with the awareness of God's constant presence.

Quite how we as a Church will function in the weeks and months ahead with the prospect of continued social distancing, remains to be seen. No doubt there will be both profound challenges and wonderful opportunities.

But if in these weeks of isolation we have cultivated a sense of the God who walks with us every step of the way, as Jesus walked with those disciples on the road to Emmaus, perhaps we will emerge with a surprising and priceless gift: a powerful sense of the constant and life-giving presence of the God who will never keep His distance from us, but is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION....

Read this short prayer by Ann Lewin:

*Pause at the threshold
Of the sacred space;
Bow low.
Prepare for fresh
Encounter
With the Holy One.*

And realise that this moment – and every moment – is a threshold into sacred space.

PRAYERS

Although we cannot meet under the same roof, God has joined us together by His Spirit, and so we pray.

Walk with us, Lord, on our journey of faith,
Both as individuals and as the Church of God;
Open up to us the truths you long for us to understand,
And inspire all who teach and encourage.
Equip us all to pass on the good news of Easter.

Lord God

Abide with us.

We are making fewer journeys now,

But go with us, Lord, on those we do take:
Walk with us down the streets of our cities, towns and villages,
Drive with us when we drive to supermarkets or work.
Accompany us as we move around our homes.
And meet all those who are curious, searching,
Or moving in the wrong direction.
Let your presence be sought
And recognised in all the world.

Lord God

Abide with us.

Walk with us, Lord, in our life journeys,
Guiding, teaching and correcting us,
As we learn the lessons of loving
In our homes, our work and our communities.

Lord God

Abide with us.

Walk with us, Lord,
Through the times of suffering and pain,
Alerting us to one another's needs
And providing for us in whatever ways are best for us.
Help us to trust you through the dark times;
Breathe new life and hope
Into those who are close to despair.

Take a few moments to remember before God those who are struggling with illness – those known to you, and those you do not know.

Lord God

Abide with us.

Walk with us, Lord, through the valley of the shadow of death;
May our love and prayers support those who walk that journey today.
Draw close to them and welcome them into the joy of heaven.

*Offer to God's loving mercy all who have died – including **Hilary Jones, John Smith, Aputhamalar Sanmuganathan, David Robinson, Peter Manning, Michael Turvey, Howard Cotterill, Hugh Stanbra** – and those whose anniversaries fall at this time – including **Irene Everett-Perkins, Eric Orton, Felix Alexander, Joan Kendall, Jim Thorp, and Jo Wasley.***

And offer to God all the fallen whom we remember at **Anzac Day.**

Lord God

Abide with us.

Lord, we thank you for walking with us wherever we go,
We thank you that you are indeed alive, every step of the way!

Merciful Father

**Accept these prayers for the sake of your Son,
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer (use this version, or the traditional words if you prefer)

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.

Amen.

ENDING

Loving God,
May our minds be full of your voice,
Our hearts full of your love,
And our thoughts full of your grace.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God,
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
Be with us all evermore. **Amen.**

