

3rd Sunday of Easter “Which Direction Will We Travel?”

Fr. Frank Schuster

We are treated this weekend with the Road to Emmaus. It is perhaps one of my favorite accounts of the Risen Lord because it so rich with meaning. I have shared in the past how this Gospel reading seems to follow the way we celebrate Mass, perhaps giving us an insight into how the Early Church worshiped. The disciples were going to Emmaus. If you look at a map, what this meant was they were going the wrong way. The Mass begins with the Penitential Rite where we ask for God’s forgiveness of our sins, preparing our hearts for the Liturgy of the Word...which seems to be what follows in the story of the Road to Emmaus. Jesus, whom they could not yet recognize, points out all the scripture readings that speak about him. After which, it comes as no surprise then, that when they recline at table, Jesus becomes visible to them in the breaking of the bread. That Jesus vanished from their sight after he became known in the breaking of the bread seems to articulate clearly that the Early Church believed that the Eucharist is truly the Body and Blood of the Lord. And, last but not least, the result of that encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist compelled the disciples to turn around and go back to Jerusalem, back to the Eleven, back to the Apostolic Church. I find all of this to be quite beautiful. However, this Sunday, I want to focus more intentionally on the beginning and the ending of this post resurrection account.

You see, in the beginning of this Gospel story, these disciples were disillusioned. They were beat up emotionally. They had given up on what they saw was their mission. They had lost faith. And then, after they encountered Jesus in the breaking of the bread, these disciples were transformed, they were overjoyed, renewed and found themselves re-forging their relationship with the Apostles.

The reason why I want to focus on these two moments this year is because we are living in very difficult times. In fact, when historians look back on this era, it might very well be compared to the Spanish Flu, the Great Depression and some are even saying World War 2. Tom Brokaw once talked about those who lived in those years “The Greatest Generation”. All the hardships that they experienced and lived through defined them. The era in which we live in now could very well be that serious, we don’t know yet. However, we are just at the beginning of this chapter and we are living with a lot of uncertainty. These times may very well define our generation as well. All this makes me wonder if the days are coming when a number of us will be given every reason to become disillusioned, when a number of us are given every reason to feel beat up emotionally, and when a number of us are given every reason to lose faith. In the coming year, I wonder how many of us will have that temptation at some point to put Jerusalem to our back and look someplace else, to Emmaus or whatever this can metaphorically mean. I wonder if there are some people who are with us right now in spirit participating in this mass from home who already are experiencing what I am talking about.

You see, when we talk about the Greatest Generation and how they dealt with hardship, the truth is not everyone in that generation was great. Many people fell along the way to depression, alcoholism, other addictions, poor decision making, the list goes on. The ones we

remember who were “great”, like perhaps our grandparents or great grandparents, were great for a number of reasons. We can all agree that they really knew how to stretch a nickel and they were very hard workers. However, more than that, they kept the faith alive their homes. That generation is defined in large part by how much they sacrificed for their families, for their communities and for their country. And, it must be said, the quality of life many of us have enjoyed over the years has been in no small part due to the sacrifices they made back then.

And now, here we are, we are still just entering into a chapter of history that could very well define us. Fifty years from now, what will that future generation think about us? It makes me wonder. Maybe we will be seen as a great generation as well. I think we all hope so. However, the tough truth is, to earn the title “great”, a generation has to endure a time of great hardship. That doesn’t sound like much fun at all. It reminds me of what Frodo said to Gandalf in the Fellowship of the Ring, “I wish the ring had never come to me, I wish none of this had happened.” To which Gandalf replies: “So do all who live to see such times but that is not for them to decide. All you have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to you.” What this means is, at least in my mind, if we want to be a great generation we have to earn it one person at a time, one vocation at a time, and yes, one good decision at a time. The little decisions we make each day will add up over time and will define us for good or for ill. Personally, I believe Mother Teresa’s advice of doing little things with great love is perhaps more important now than ever. However, it must be said, this generation’s fixation on hoarding things like toilet paper isn’t exactly helping our cause.

And so, let’s turn to the ending of the story of the Road to Emmaus. Up to that point the disciples were discouraged, beat up emotionally and ready to quit. An encounter with Jesus in the breaking of the bread was the medicine they needed to turn around and head back to Jerusalem, back to the Apostles. And there are two moments here that spark the imagination. The first is, Jesus being made known to them in the breaking of the bread calls to mind how the Hebrews dealt with extreme hardship as they journeyed through the desert for forty days. They too were fed bread from heaven. This story can also bring to mind the biblical account of how Elijah collapsed in the desert in a time of disillusionment and even prayed for death. And an angel of the Lord appeared and gave Elijah bread from heaven. This bread not only nourished his body, it also renewed his soul for the journey that lay ahead. With the Road to Emmaus, Jesus is literally the bread from heaven that not only nourished these disciples, this bread also filled their hearts with joy, they were renewed, and their faith was restored.

This encounter with Jesus inspired them to turn around and return to Jerusalem, back to the Apostles. What this means is, disciples of Jesus cannot survive as lone rangers, we can’t do this alone. Faith requires that we belong to a community that exists to support each other. Even if every member of that community is a sinner, and news flash we all are, when we encounter Jesus in the breaking of the bread, we are welcomed in his very Body, the Church. This is why we call this moment in Mass communion. As Christians, community matters. If we are to make it through these times, we need to make it through these times together.

Social distancing this day and age makes building community difficult, but it is not impossible. Every time our soul starts itching for Emmaus, and the devil is good at tempting anyone in this regard...you can set your watch to it...when we feel the temptation to isolate, stray, or excessively self-medicate, that is exactly when we need to turn our gaze towards Jesus and encounter him on the way. This is exactly when we need to get connected back to our family and community however we can because we cannot do this alone. We are blessed with technology in this regard, previous generations had little more than paper, pen and postage, so we just need to figure out a way. My friends, this coming week and likely also in the coming months we are challenged to encounter Jesus on whatever path we are walking on and let him transform us, and if necessary redirect us, back to Jerusalem, back to the Communion of Saints, back to the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.