

the Sunday Readings



“It is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things”.
(Luke 24 : 46 – 48)

3rd Sunday of Easter

Life in the Spirit of Jesus

3rd Sunday of Easter

*witnesses to the Truth*¹

introduction

The appearances of the risen Christ to his disciples seek to confirm them in their faith and to awaken them to their new responsibilities. Luke reiterates the unity between the historical Jesus and the risen Christ. Now they understand him better and their minds are opened to the Scriptures. They see their task is to be witnesses to the message and resurrection of the Lord, *'beginning from Jerusalem'*. For Luke, it is from there, that the victory over death is to be proclaimed.

first reading: Acts 3 : 13 – 15, 17 – 19²

[Peter speaks in Solomon's Portico]

When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?(12) The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him.(13) But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you,(14) and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.(15) . . . And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers.(17) In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer.(18) Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.(19)

The passage forms the second of Peter's sermons reported in *the Book of Acts*. After the day of Pentecost, Peter takes the opportunity to address a crowd of Israelites in the precincts of the Temple at Jerusalem. A crowd had gathered to observe a man cured of his lameness by Peter. Following Jesus' death, his disciples acted, *'in his name'*.³ They begin to speak, baptise, exorcise, and heal – *in the name of Jesus*. When a disciple acts, *'in the name of Jesus'*, it implies that he or she, is acting out the training they received from Jesus.⁴ Jesus' prophetic activity ensured that he would never become just a local teacher attached to a fixed synagogue. Jesus and his disciples were passionately committed to address and

1 Front cover image: Jesus Instructing the Apostles before sending them on their first mission Duccio Di Buoninsegna, 14th century.

2 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

3 See Ac.3:6

4 A disciple assimilates and lives *'into'* the personal calling of their master. Later, following a period of apprenticeship, the disciple is authorised to re-present the master. Peter does that (Cf. vv.13-15). Jesus was Peter's teacher in Torah-keeping. Jesus immersed himself in *God's living Torah* with his disciples. At the same time, Jesus exercised an urgent responsibility to attract all *'the lost sheep of the House of Israel'*, back to the wisdom of *Covenant*, or, *Torah-keeping*.

heal the brokenness of all the Israelites. The deepest longings of the Israelites were ripe for the realisation of newness. The Spirit of God fashioned the hearts of the disciples, through Jesus' practise. Christians see in Jesus, the mysterious 'servant' of Isaiah.⁵

Jesus is acknowledged by Peter as, having a profound sympathy with the Lord God of Israelite history.⁶ Peter identifies Jesus as, 'servant of God' (v.13),⁷ and as *Messiah*, or *the Christ* (v.18). It is especially the latter title, that crowns Jesus' ministry as, 'Master of Torah'. Peter and John have no power themselves. Rather, the power is, *in Jesus' name*. Jesus died because the Israelites 'denied' him. The great act of God is the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection sets right the evil of his crucifixion. Peter appeals thus, to his Israelite audience.⁸ This power for healing and newness is there for all, beginning in Jerusalem. According to Peter, the Israelites acted out of ignorance (v.17). God, through the prophets, announced in advance, the necessity of the *suffering*, or *death*, of *the Anointed One*. The Lord God carried out the plan to empower people in Jesus' time. Now through the successful assimilation of Jesus' personal power: *the living Torah*, his disciples have that same capacity to transform beyond the temple and Jerusalem through their practise.

response: Psalm 4 : 1 – 8⁹

[Confident plea for deliverance from enemies]

Answer me when I call, O God of my right!

You gave me room when I was in distress.

Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.(1)

How long, you people, shall my honour suffer shame?

How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?(2)

*Selah*¹⁰

But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself;

the Lord hears when I call to him.(3)

When you are disturbed, do not sin;

ponder it on your beds, and be silent.(4)

Selah

Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord.(5)

There are many who say, "O that we might see some good!

Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!"(6)

You have put gladness in my heart

more than when their grain and wine abound.(7)

5 Cf. *Is.52:13 – 53:12*

6 *Ac. 3:17-18*

7 [v.13] 'Servant:' - the word can be translated, 'child', but in the Greek version of *Is.52:13*, it is used for *the Suffering Servant of YHWH*; compare the prayers in *Acts 4 vv. 25, 27 and 30*.

8 *Ac. 3:6 & 3:19*

9 [vv.2-4] A rebuke for those who falsely accuse the psalmist of wrong-doing. The charge is probably a formal accusation to which the accused replies by a public declaration of innocence (compare with *Ps.26:4-7*).

10 [v.2] 'Selah' is a liturgical direction: it may indicate that there should be an instrumental interlude at this point in the singing of the psalm.

*I will both lie down and sleep in peace;
for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.(8)*

The speaker affirms a transformed faith. Its a bold act of faith to acknowledge distress whatever it's cause. But once the acknowledgement is made the speaker has faith enough to insist that all experiences of disorder are properly God's business. It is faith in a God who is present in, participates in, and is attentive to, the weaknesses and displacements of life (vv.1-3). The speaker deals directly about the human experience with a God who is both Lord of the human experience and a partner with humankind. The psalmist's prayer is applied by Christians to Jesus, who in distress called on God. God raised Jesus from the dead and vindicated him. Jesus' work completed – he sits secure at God's, 'right hand'.

The speaker recalls God's goodness and expresses confidence that God will do once again what has been done in the past (v.8). In the sort of bargaining that goes on here, the speaker assumes she is valued by God, because she offers praise. It is a relationship of familiarity. This confidence is based on God's past support. The trust and confidence evokes God's promise of intrusive transformative action in the lives of faithful Torah-keepers.

second reading: 1 John 2:1-5

[Christ our Advocate]

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;(1) and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.(2) Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments.(3) Whoever says, "I have come to know him," but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist;(4) but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him.(5)

The author is dealing with secessionists within the community, who although they claim communion with God, don't see the importance of keeping commandments. According to the writer, they pretend to be free from the guilt of sin. They see sinlessness as something realised; and not as an obligation. The author challenges such perfectionism (vv.3-5). For the writer, *the children of God*,¹¹ are all in God's camp – they may still fall; but they are on the right side of the rampart, unless they definitely sever themselves from Christ. Sin is, "cutting oneself off" from the human Christ, which is different from falling. Sin is a complete break with God. It is jumping into the camp of the enemy (the anti-Christ).

The author challenges the secessionists' thinking, by relating their practise to "keeping the commandments" (v.5). It seems they have been down-playing the

¹¹ [v.1] *My little children*: like the term "beloved," this is an expression of pastoral care (cf. *Jn.13:33*; & *Jn.21:5*; & *1 Co.4:14*).

importance to ethical behaviour as a means of salvation. Their stand flowed from their interpretation of Jesus' teaching authority – if Jesus' divine origin was all-important for his work of salvation, then his Earthly career and the way he lived and died was of no importance at all. Why then, should the Earthly life of the Christian be pertinent to salvation? It seems that in this climate of opinion, any claims of intimacy with God, may have been made without any stress on what a person does in the world.

The writer corrects this imbalance, by emphasizing that the battle is over. Transformation has taken place here on Earth. And Jesus has done the real work. Being transformed means adopting Jesus' practise.¹² The writer stresses the grandeur of God's unparalleled love and makes an appeal for the Christian disciples to be less active and more contemplative. The ideal disciple is a person who is prayerfully aware of Jesus' work of transformation in the human realm. That transformation has raised the status of all, '*the children of God*'. They are charged with extending that transformation in their daily living by keeping Jesus' commandments.¹³

gospel reading: Luke 24 : 35 – 48

[Jesus appears to his disciples]

The disciples told the eleven and their companions, what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.(35) While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."(36b) They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.(37) He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?(38) Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."(39) And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.(40) While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?"(41) They gave him a piece of broiled fish, (42) and he took it and ate in their presence.(43) Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."(44) Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,(45) and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,(46) and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.(47) You are witnesses of these things.(48)

Luke records Jesus appearing to Simon Peter; to two disciples on the road to Emmaus; and to the Eleven joined by the disciples from Emmaus. The two disciples from Emmaus had gone immediately back to Jerusalem to tell the other

12 Cf. Ac.3:6

13 Cf. 1 Jn.3:5

disciples of Jesus about their recognising Jesus – ‘*at the breaking of bread*’. While they were talking about these events back in Jerusalem, Jesus seeks out their company. The risen Jesus, who searches out stray disciples, is the same Jesus who sat down and ate with the poor and outcasts. His disciples recognise him in the act of breaking bread and eating fish with them.

This ‘*presence*’ has nothing to do with remembering a dead hero; it is a living presence. Luke records very physical signs that the risen Jesus is truly present in the movement that continues on after Jesus had ‘*departed*’. Luke affirms that *the Messianic Reign of Peace* is really with *the One* who was crucified (vv.44-45); that he would rise from the dead (v.46); and that, ‘*in his name*’ repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached throughout the world, starting from Jerusalem (v.47). It is the dawn of the new day. The day that had been promised in Israel’s Scriptures. The disciples need to proclaim this new reality, beyond the Holy City, by their own liberating practise. On the road to all the nations, the story of Jesus’ practise gets re-woven. Death had barely laid the body of Jesus to rest in the Earth than it was “*raised up*”.¹⁴

Death has not had the last word. Death couldn’t stop the story being told. The questions posed by the resurrection appearances are left for us readers to answer ourselves (v.48). The gospel accounts are open to sequels. The story isn’t closed.¹⁵ The disciples’ relationships with others is no longer that of domination; but of *walking with* others on a journey. The seeing and hearing of the liberating practise of Jesus is to be found in our own practise. For disciples after the resurrection, the question was, and still is: “*what is our practice on the level of love, hope and faith?*” rather than, “*do we have the faith?*”

14 From now on the narration of the practice of Jesus was confided to those who follow him on the road of mutual sharing among living bodies.

15 As long as Jesus was physically present, the power coming from him and his actions merely dazzled disciples. Once the disciples have experienced the empowering presence of the Lord (*Lk.24:49*), it is their own hands which now transform bodies and return them to life, to work, to speaking, and to love.

for sharing:¹⁶

- *The resurrection of Jesus is our call to repent, to believe, and to trust in the power for life-giving. **Comment on Acts 3 : 13 – 15, 17 – 19***
- *The writer of the letter believes in involvement 'in the world' but not at the expense of awareness of what we really are – God's own people! **Comment on 1 John 2 : 1 – 5***
- *Consider ways we can deepen our understanding of the Israelite and Christian Scriptures and help others grow in love for them. **Comment on Luke 24 : 35 – 38***

prayer:¹⁷

*God of all the prophets,
 You fulfilled Your promise of old
 that Your Christ would suffer
 and so rise to glory.
 Open our minds to understand the Scriptures
 and fill us with joyful wonder
 in the presence of the risen Christ,
 that we may be his witnesses
 to the farthest reaches of the Earth.
 We ask this through Jesus Christ,
 the firstborn from the dead,
 who lives and reigns with You now and always
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
 God for ever and ever. Amen.*

review:¹⁸

We spend energy on justifying our personal failures. We look for maliciousness in other peoples' motives, or we lament brutal developments in society that supposedly bring about our failure. We gloss over a lot of our own behaviour that contributes to our downfalls.

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- 16 Lectio Divina: There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*.
- 17 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.
- 18 The review: At the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the Word and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus, seemed to have something of this sense of failure and regret. Props need to be removed, plans interrupted, trivial pursuits stripped away, in order that we learn to place our reliance on God and on God alone. Failures are being measured by a new kind of standard.

The only failure worth the name in God's new world is – trying to go it alone – without a real place for God in our lives. Hard knocks, or failures in life, can bring us to this point of honesty. Jesus' talk to the disciples on the road to Emmaus – of the hard knocks messiahs must endure – was all the more compelling because he had experienced what it was to be with God in life and in death.

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