

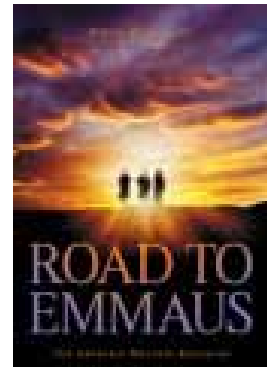
## Third Sunday of Easter

***“And so your faith and hope are fixed on God.”***

1 Peter 1, 21

***“How mistaken you are...Was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and then to enter into his glory?”***

Luke 24, 25-26



Today's first reading from the *Acts of the Apostles* contains what is possibly the greatest gaffe in the New Testament. In addressing the crowd that had gathered at Pentecost, Peter puts his foot in his mouth as he claims:

In accordance with his own plan, God had already decided that Jesus would be handed over to you.” (Acts 2, 23) Peter gives the unfortunate impression that God actually planned the death of Jesus and used people to make it happen.

In time, Peter's statement gave rise to some distorted theologies of redemption which claimed that Jesus was the price that was exacted for our redemption and that the price had to be paid to Satan, the slaveowner. Such a view placed God in the ridiculous position of having to do business with a fallen, horned angel dressed in long red underwear and carrying a pitch-fork.

Consequently, we have to read today's second reading with caution. It, too, refers to payments being made for our redemption: “For you know what was paid to set you free from the worthless manner of life handed down by your ancestors. It was not something that can be destroyed, such as silver or gold; it was the costly sacrifice of Christ, who was like a lamb without defect or flaw.” (1 Peter 1, 18-19)

However, in the Emmaus story of today's gospel, Jesus gives a much better explanation of his sufferings and death. In the delightful exchange that takes place between the disciples and the stranger who meets up with them, it emerges that the disciples are clearly disappointed with God. They are full of the recent events that saw their hopes completely dashed. Initially, the stranger listens to them but plays dumb. However, he then opens up to give a picture of God that is very different from the one we were given by Peter in today's first reading. It is true that Jesus speaks of a certain fixed pattern in his own torture and death that were supervised by God from the very beginning: “How foolish you are...Was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” (Luke 24, 25-26) But the necessity of this suffering is not attributed to machinations on God's part. Jesus explains it in terms of what often happens when there is a clash between love and sin. Jesus points out that the whole story of the struggle between good and evil and what is said about himself in that struggle is to be found in the Scriptures: “And Jesus explained to them what was said about himself in all the Scriptures, beginning with the books of Moses and the writings of all the prophets.” (Luke 24, 27)

It seems to me that the two disciples are affected not so much by the arguments which the stranger puts to them as by the human encounter they have with him. Their humanity is touched by a fellow human being who has experienced the worst of what people can do to one another but who has not become bitter and twisted as a consequence. They are so moved by the stranger that they invite him to stay with them. They are distracted from griping about how God runs the world and shown that God has such great compassion for humanity that he treats us as adults, inviting us to learn from our own stupidities and to give ourselves freely to others in love and service.

The Emmaus story captures our imagination simply because it's a story with which we can identify. Life is so often depicted as a journey and everyone who has ever lived has been a traveller on the road of life. There is much in world literature that has picked up this very theme. All of us are familiar in some way or other with books like John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* or Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, both of which present life through the metaphor of a journey. And there are countless folk and fairy tales that do the same. Many of these journey tales have three recurring elements: a divine or supernatural guide or escort, human stupidity, ignorance or blindness, and a moment of revelation or insight.

All three elements are present in the Emmaus story, just as they are in the story from the Book of Tobias in which Tobias is accompanied on his journey by Raphael, an archangel whom Tobias does not recognize until he is cured of his blindness.

You will notice in the Emmaus story that the two disciples come to realize that they are in the presence of the "divine" only when they do something themselves. And that something in the story is their move to extend hospitality to the stranger who accompanies them. In other words, we come to recognize God when we positively reach out to others in compassion, care and selflessness.

There are countless folk tales with the same message: the story of the cobbler who gave a pair of beautifully crafted shoes to a beggar, only to realize in a dream that night that the beggar was Jesus in disguise. There's a similar story of St. Martin of Tours who on coming across a beggar on the side of the road, cut his soldier's cloak in two and gave the man half. In a dream he had that night, Christ appeared as the beggar wearing half the cloak.

The Emmaus story is a reminder to us that we do not journey through life alone. It's only natural that disappointment will come our way and that we will find ourselves complaining about being let down or betrayed or afflicted with illness. There will even be times when we wonder if God really cares. Yet this story gives us a promise of an assuring presence which we come to experience only when we can shake ourselves out of self-pity and reach out to others who are also doing it tough. And as so often happens, the realization comes only in hindsight. That's why it's worth our while at the end of each day to pause for a few minutes to reflect on where God came into my life today. Let's not forget that God can get at us only through the people we

meet, the events that happen around us, the thoughts we think, the feelings we feel and God's creation all around us.