

FR JUSTIN FORD, HOMILY, 3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER, 26<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2020

From anyone's point of view, the accounts we have of the resurrection of Jesus are something astounding. And non-believers, when they actually look at them, have a very hard time trying to make sense of them. But in particular, compared to some of the other appearances of Jesus after his resurrection, this one on the road to Emmaus that St Luke tells us about, confounds all our human expectations.

We heard the words in our gospel: 'Jesus himself came up and walked by their side; but *something prevented them from recognising him.*' So if the disciples were just making up a story of how Jesus had appeared to them, the last thing they'd invent would be, that for most of the appearance, they just didn't recognise him. Or, if they were having delusions, once again: supposedly, they wanted so much to see Jesus, they just imagined he was there – and yet for a long period of the conversation, they didn't even realise it was him!

It's something that seems to happen in a few of the other resurrection accounts as well. St Mark refers very briefly to the event on the road to Emmaus, when he says Jesus 'appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country'. And then in John's Gospel, when Mary Magdalene first meets Jesus when she's at the empty tomb – she comes out of the tomb thinking that someone's taken away Jesus' body; Jesus is standing there, and at first she thinks he's the gardener. So she says to him, 'If you've carried him away, tell me where you've put him, and I'll take him away.' But Jesus responds with one word: 'Mary' – and when she hears her name, suddenly she realises that it's him.

Then later on in John's Gospel, in the appearance by the Sea of Galilee, it happens again. The disciples in the boat don't realise at first that it's Jesus calling out to them from the shore, until they follow his instructions, cast out the net, and have a great catch of fish. Then they're back on the beach, and Jesus cooks breakfast for them. And we read, 'None of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?", because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.' And then he has the long conversation with Peter, when he asks three times, 'Do you love me?', and makes him shepherd of the flock.

Now, other appearances, there's no doubt at all. When he first appears to the Apostles on the evening of Easter Sunday, straight after the two disciples have come back from Emmaus, and while they're all still discussing it, suddenly Jesus appears among them, and says, 'Peace be with you' (we read in both John and Luke). And Luke tells us, 'They were startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost'. So he says to them, 'Why are you frightened? Look at my hands and my feet.' So he shows them his wounds, just as he would to Thomas a week later. And then to prove he's flesh and blood, not just a spirit, he says to them, 'Give me something to eat'. And he eats the piece of broiled fish.

So, on the one hand, something very physical and real: not just some vague spirit, but the same body that died on the cross, with the wounds in his hands and his feet, and that was buried in the tomb, the tomb which is now empty. And so physical, that he eats the piece of fish. And so different from a vague ghostlike appearance, that earlier in the day he walks for miles with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and they just think it's some normal person they're having a conversation with.

So, trying to put it all together – well, none of the theories non-believers try to come up with make any sense. But at the same time, on the surface, it's not quite what believers would have

predicted either. These times when Jesus isn't recognised straight away. If God's only purpose in the resurrection appearances, if God's only purpose in *all the miracles*, was to just to convince people, and to communicate information as efficiently as possible – well, he could work a huge miracle today for the whole world to see. And if some people still weren't convinced, he could work another huge miracle tomorrow.

But of course, God's purpose isn't just to communicate information. Above all, he wants to enter into a personal relationship with us. And for it to be a personal relationship, he leaves us free to enter that relationship or not. And so he doesn't work a great overwhelming miracle that would force everyone to accept the truth. He does give quite enough evidence – for those who are willing to make the journey of seeking the truth, and living according to the truth when they find it; but he also leaves room for the freedom of faith. And that means he also leaves open the possibility of people hiding from the truth, of running away from the truth.

So maybe that's part of the reason why, in quite a few of his appearances to his disciples after his resurrection, he appears in such a way as not to be immediately recognised by them: he wants to awaken their faith. But also, there's mystery here. We know that the resurrection wasn't just a return to normal earthly life, but that Jesus was now in a new kind of bodily existence, the beginning of the new creation, beyond the ordinary limits of space and time. So it seems he's able to be present how he chooses and when he chooses. He has the freedom of appearing in the form he chooses.

Or another way of approaching it – psychology tells us that people have different levels of how easily they recognise faces; and some people have a condition that makes it quite difficult. It relates to how our brain works. So, maybe part of what happened is that God temporarily 'clouded' the minds of the disciples. But in any case, it's only at the moment of faith that the eyes of the disciples are fully opened to recognise him.

Now maybe one of the reasons Luke gave such emphasis to this story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, was because he knew that his hearers also had to learn to recognise Jesus in unfamiliar forms. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he promised to be with us till the end of time. But that means we need to keep recognising all the different *ways* he's still present among us.

In the gospel we hear how the disciples recognised Jesus at the breaking of bread: 'their eyes were opened and they recognised him.' So that highlights the centrality of the Eucharist, which was called 'the breaking of the bread' in the early Church. But in these times when we can't even attend the Mass, there's an extra level of how Jesus is hidden – and yet how in reality, he's walking by our side just as much: just as he walked by the side of the two disciples when they were downcast and sorrowful.

Sometimes, in the darkness of our lives, we need so much to feel the presence of Christ, and like the two disciples, we want to say, 'Stay with us, Lord, since evening is approaching and day is almost over.' May our eyes be opened to recognise in how many ways he is indeed with us, till the end of time.