

In the gospel for today we hear of an incident that is only captured in the Gospel of Luke. It is a familiar story and yet we rarely reflect on this story as one that is so much a part of our daily lives.

The retelling of the incident of how those early disciples encountered Jesus immediately after his crucifixion and death is one that should strike a chord with every Christian. It's relevance reaches every moment of our lives, especially the times when we are not even conscious of Jesus, preoccupied as we often are with our daily struggles.

As with other encounters Jesus 'meets us' where we are at. At the tomb Jesus meets Mary Magdalene as she weeps because she cannot find his body. When Jesus appears to the apostles they are locked away in an upper room for fear of what might happen to them. When he appears to the apostles a second time there is no indication that they have left the upper room, perhaps still fearful. This time however they are trying hard to convince Thomas that they had seen the Lord. Thomas cannot be convinced by their words. Maybe because of the impossibility of what they were saying or maybe it's because they apostles didn't seem able or willing to let it have impact on their lives. Maybe he just didn't want to be hurt again.

The Emmaus story like the other appearances has deep significants which goes beyond trying to explain the resurrection in human terms.

The Emmaus encounter is a story of a journey. Not even a particular long or difficult journey. While archaeologists are not sure where Emmaus was, the best guess is that it may have been no more than 6kms from Jerusalem.

They were heading away from Jerusalem. As Jesus predicted 'strike the shepherd and the sheep will scatter' (Matt. 26:31). They are filled with doubt and a profound sense of loss. Not only the loss of the Master but also their hopes in him. "Our own hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free".

We too are often beset with fears and doubts, broken dreams and disappointment, loss of loved ones or just confusion about the direction of our lives.

How do we see Jesus handling these situations?

Firstly, as with the disciples he walks with us, listens to the murmurings of our hearts which express our longings and fears. For many, talking to God, telling him what troubles us and how we expect him to "fix it", is how they understand prayer. However, in the dynamics of prayer being aware of his presence and aware that he is listening with an open heart is only the first stage.

As with those journeying to Emmaus we still need to be taught to walk in the right direction. The road to Emmaus which we see in our own lives is the road to discovery and communion with not only God as revealed by Jesus as Father but with the other pilgrims on the same journey. In the story, Jesus after listening to the murmurings of their hearts then takes the time to 'explain the scriptures'.

How can the scriptures make sense of 'my' greatest needs?

The problem in trying to handle our own needs is that we get bogged down in our own sense of what is possible or impossible. We create a small world around our insecurities. We sometime wrongly imagine that we have the solution to our problems, but very rarely do we understand the true nature of our problem. This is largely because we forget that all humanity including ourselves are interconnected. We are bound by a common humanity whose destiny is governed by the Lord of Creation.

When Jesus explains the scriptures, he puts our whole life in the context of the Father's creation and kingdom. The scriptures are not only concerned with 'teaching', but they are also the 'vault' of human experience. Jesus is the 'door' or 'key' to that vault, or as he put it 'I am the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6) It is he who can open the treasures of wisdom and understanding.

As Jesus explained the scriptures he taught them in a way which helped them to understand in the depths of their being how it all makes sense.

The disciples reflected: 'did not our hearts burn within us as he explained the scriptures? Reflecting on what he has been trying to tell them all along? 'That he must first suffer and be put to death and to rise on the third day.' In other words, didn't the penny finally drop about the meaning of

it all. Joys and sorrows, dreams and disappointments and successes and failures all make sense. There is in the Father's plan, a meaning for it all.

Having explained the Scriptures, however, was not the end of nor the reason for the encounter. Their eyes were only opened when they entered a full communion with him. They only recognized him 'in the breaking of the bread'. Luke's Gospel clearly understands Eucharist not just as a ritual but through the ritual we discover an expression of a complete communion of body, mind and heart, A communion of disciples journeying together, dialoguing with their Master, and a communion with Jesus who brings about the presence of the Father's Kingdom.

At the end of the story these disciples immediately set out to return to Jerusalem to tell the others. The experience could not keep until a convenient time to share. Despite the lateness of the hour, or social convention or even the fear of what may happen to them in they returned to Jerusalem, they felt compelled to seek communion with the apostles.

All that remains is to ask ourselves, "Where am I on this journey?"

Fr Leo Mifsud