

## ***“Their Eyes Were Opened”***

**By Fr. Paul Mankowski, S.J.**

April 26, 2020 – Third Sunday of Easter

Readings: Acts 2.14, 22-33; 1 Peter 1.17-21; Luke 24. 13-35

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In the second of his three volume reflection titled *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict makes this striking observation about the earliest days of the new Church in Jerusalem: “Strangely there is not a hint to be found anywhere of a dispute over the Temple and the necessity of its sacrifices, even though, according to the Acts of the Apostles, ‘a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.’” How did it come to pass that the first Christians, all of whom had been observant Jews, were unanimous in putting temple sacrifice behind them? St. Luke helps us understand this extraordinary departure from Jewish worship via the revelation and the change of heart that made it not only possible, but necessary. Further, he provides precious insight into the shape and meaning of the celebration of the Eucharist in our own churches in our own time.

### **The Necessity of the Passion for the Glory of the Resurrection**

The Gospel for the Third Sunday of Easter continues the accounts of the mysterious appearances of Jesus on the day of his resurrection. In this passage, St. Luke tells us of two disciples headed (without explanation) for a village named Emmaus, located a couple hours’ walk from Jerusalem, talking and arguing among themselves about “all the things that had taken place.” We are told that Jesus joins himself to the disciples on their journey, but that “their eyes were prevented from recognizing him” — though it is not clear whether the cause of the hindrance was something that happened in the physiognomy of Jesus or in the awareness of the disciples. Whereas most of what the Gospels tell us about Jesus comes from his innermost group of followers, this account comes to us from a broader, less intimate circle of disciples, one of whom is nameless and the other, Cleopas, named only here. It is as if St. Luke has trucked his camera backwards and widened his lens to present us with a man-in-the-street perspective on the agony and bewilderment of that first Easter Day.

The disciples do not recognize the traveler who has joined them, whom they take to be a stranger to Jerusalem and ignorant of her recent upheavals, yet they are frank in their response when asked what they were discussing. We are told that at Jesus’ question they halt their walking — extraordinary detail! — and stand looking downcast. They have their tails between their legs, as it were, and begin to answer as if acknowledging defeat. They speak about their prior devotion to Jesus and their bewilderment and chagrin at what had befallen this “prophet great in word and deed” — at the same time revealing the shocking limits of their expectations for his messiahship. “We had hoped ...” they begin to say. What had they hoped? “... that Jesus would be the one to free us from our sins”? “... that Jesus would be the one to raise us from the dead? “... that Jesus would be the one to bestow on us the gift of life eternal”? No. “We had hoped ... that he would emancipate Israel.” *Clunk*. His own disciples saw the Nazorean as a hero in the line of Judas Maccabeus, who would restore Home Rule to the Israeli Jews. One can almost picture Jesus slapping his brow in exasperation.

“Fools!” he says to them: “How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke!” The folly for which Jesus chides his disciples is not slowness to understand but slowness to believe. Neither the fulfillments of the ancient

prophecies nor the miraculous confirmations occurring before their eyes had succeeded in opening their hearts beyond the narrowest range of possibility. What their slow, stiff, grudging hearts were incapable of admitting — of making real to them — is that it was “*necessary* that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory.” This particular necessity is key for the disciples to grasp, and St. Luke is especially punctilious in letting us hear Jesus’ insistence thereon (see also Luke 9.22 and 17.25). In fact, the “hopes” of the slow-hearted disciples were excluded from the outset, since the ignominious capture, torture, and death (precisely the things that would mark the futility and final defeat of a this-worldly messiahship) were foretold by the sacred authors as indispensable. And so, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets,” Jesus “interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures.”

## Interpreting the Scriptures and Eucharistic Action

When the stranger “interpreted” the scriptures for these disciples, we might point out that he gave them a hermeneutic (*diērmēneusen*) of the Old Testament. That’s to say that after his resurrection Jesus gave to the Church the essential interpretative key in teaching her that, and how, the Old Testament points forward to him and his mission: incarnation, life, passion, death and resurrection. This means, *inter alia*, that it is logically inconsistent for a Christian to admit St. Luke to be a reliable witness to the life of Jesus of Nazareth and at the same time to deny the testimony of Jesus that the Old Testament is a story about *him*.

Having reached Emmaus around the evening dinner hour, the disciples prevail upon the stranger to stay with them. While at table, Jesus mysteriously takes on himself the role of host rather than guest and picks up the bread provided, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the two disciples. Though these disciples were not present at the last supper, they understand the action as a *eucharistic* action, one that uniquely and unambiguously signifies the presence of Jesus Christ. St. Luke tells us, “With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight.”

The expression “their eyes were opened” repeats verbatim the Septuagintal Greek translation of Genesis 3.7, referring to the first man and woman in the garden after having eaten of the forbidden fruit. The point in each case is a newly awakened awareness of a spiritual reality — always present to the senses and to the intellect yet not truly understood by the heart until the moment of revelation. The blessing and breaking and giving of bread are a single moment in which his disciples share with Jesus an act of sacrifice and thanksgiving that reveals to them the truth about themselves and about their relation to God the Father to whom the thanks and the offering are directed. Further, they begin to understand and feel the importance *for their own souls* of the massive, millennia-old endeavor of revelation and salvation told in the Old Testament: God’s work of creation, election, promise, instruction, covenant, chastisement, prophecy, and deliverance that progressively narrows throughout the centuries and comes into focus on that very day in that very place. “Were not our hearts burning within us,” they say to one other, “while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?” This was not one more occasion of Bible Study — it was their hearts that were burning — for in pointing to the Messiah in the scriptures the stranger was talking about himself, and when the eyes of the disciples were opened for them to recognize Jesus they realized that he had been talking about them, the heirs of the covenant, as well. The breaking of bread opened their hearts to the scriptures, while the scriptures beamed the true meaning into the breaking of bread.

## Making the Lord Known

And the episode does not end here. St. Luke tells us that the two disciples “set out at once and returned to Jerusalem,” reversing their course, literally as well as figuratively, as their feelings of defeat and dismay are changed to a joy that was imperative to share with the other believers. They are met by the Eleven — and unspecified others — with rapturous reports that the Lord had indeed been raised and had appeared to Simon Peter, whereat “the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of bread.”

This way of the “making known” of the Lord is henceforth taken as a distinctive and indispensable mark of the authentic Church, and indeed it is the force of this conviction that explains the departure from Jewish practice Pope Benedict had noted as so strange. In the same passage he writes:

Two key locations are named for the life of the infant Church: for preaching and prayer they meet in the Temple, which they still regard and accept as house of God’s word and house of prayer; on the other hand the breaking of bread — the new “cultic center” in the lives of the faithful — is celebrated in their houses as places of assembly and communion in the name of the Risen Lord. Even if up to this point there has been no explicit distancing from the

sacrifices of the Law, an essential distinction has nevertheless been drawn. The place of the sacrifices has now been taken by the “breaking of bread.”

There is a profound sense in which this Sunday’s Gospel prefigures, recapitulates, and illuminates the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Jesus joins his disciples in ways of which they are not fully aware (“where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I ...”); scriptures of the Old Covenant are repeated in order to point to their connection to and fulfillment by God’s action in the New; the priestly offerings of Melchisedek are recalled in the bread and wine of the Offertory and are perfected and replaced once-for-all by the sacrifice of Golgotha, enacted and made present in the blessing and breaking and giving of the bread-no-longer-bread. Jesus ceases to be visible — “Were not our hearts burning within us?” — but only in order to make himself deeply and enduringly present to those who believe, only to feed us with himself.

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### ***For Further Reading***

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church, [101-141](#)*
- *[Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, Wednesday, April 11, 2012](#)*
- *Tom Hoopes, [“At Emmaus, the Eucharist is the Message”](#)*

### ***In Short . . .***

- *The disciples learn the necessity of Jesus’s Passion for the glory of his Resurrection.*
- *After the Resurrection, Jesus gave the Church the interpretive key for understanding how the Old Testament refers to Jesus’s incarnation, life, passion, death, and Resurrection.*
- *The Eucharistic action of Jesus in the breaking of the bread opens the eyes of the disciples, awakening them to a spiritual reality: they see a truth about themselves and their relation to God the Father.*
- *Making the risen Lord known became a distinctive mark of the Church.*
- *Today’s Gospel prefigures, recapitulates, and illuminates the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.*