

Some things to think about on Low Sunday and every other day:

The Meeting with Christ on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:12-355)

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The Sunday after Easter is designated Low Sunday, and almost every homily delivered on that day begins with some comments about why it is called Low Sunday. A number of answers can be given to that question, but here is one of the most important and the one I would like to develop here: on Low Sunday we consider revelations which come not from some "higher" source—angels or human beings who are above us in knowledge and power—but rather those which come from a "lower source," namely from deep within ourselves.

Unfortunately, we can fail to recognize these voices from within: we can, paradoxically, fail to recognize and "really know" our own wisdom; we can even sinfully refuse to recognize what we know. This is the origin of the proverb, "There are none so blind as those who will not see and none so deaf as those who will not hear." The gospel story read on Low Sunday in Liberal Catholic Churches—the story of the unnamed disciples meeting the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus is a powerful reminder of the wisdom of being attentive and receptive to these spiritual insights. It is therefore a good story to reflect upon not only on Low Sunday but on every day. Every day for us ought to be something of a Low Sunday. So let's take a look at this gospel story.

A number of techniques can assist us in plumbing the hidden depths of biblical narratives; two of the most important are (1) attention to elements which seem not to "make sense" for some reason and (2) attention to seemingly unimportant details.

In regard to the first, this gospel story seems not to "make sense" because it seems incredible, something so contrary to our ordinary experience that we feel immediately that it couldn't possibly happen. We might meet someone we had known many years ago and not recognize that person because the intervening years had changed that person's appearance and dimmed our memories, but we would hardly not recognize someone with whom we had had a long and intimate relationship and had last seen only a few days ago. The seeming unbelievability of the story, however, is not accidental; it is intended to powerfully draw attention to the central point: that spiritual realities can be seen by us without our recognizing their significance. The failure of the disciples to recognize the physical presence of Jesus is symbolic of their failure to appreciate the significance of the scriptural passages Jesus discusses with them as they all walk toward Emmaus. The entire revelation here is one of recognition--Jesus points out scriptural passages with which the disciples are already

familiar--he does not tell them anything they do not already know. Their failure to recognize what they already know is why he addresses them as "fools." (This is also why we get nowhere when we argue with people about religion: they can't learn what they aren't ready for, i.e., what they already know.)

We and others are not accountable for knowing something and failing to recognize it until it is pointed out to us; this is why these two disciples are referred not as "sinners" but only as "fools," and we can be of real service to others if we elicit from within them that which they already know--that is, when we teach them spiritual truths which they are ready to recognize, such as reincarnation, karma, the unity of all religions, the presence of divine mercy even when manifested in great human suffering; but we sin when we do know something and willfully refuse to recognize it. This is why in the ninth chapter of St. John's Gospel Jesus says of the man born blind, "This man has not sinned." The man was "born blind," but allowed Jesus to "open his eyes." Jesus, in contrast, accuses the Sanhedrin of sin because of their refusal rather than their inability to see: "If you were truly blind, there would be no sin in that, but you say, 'Behold, we see,' and so your sin remains" (John:9:40—41).

Concerning the second matter, attention to seemingly inconsequential details, the following points can be made:

1. The disciples are not Apostles, not members of the Eleven, the inner circle, and yet they return to the Eleven with an important message which is well received and which becomes important in the history of the early Church: "We recognized him in the breaking of bread."

In the early Church the conflict between gnostics and orthodox Christians revolved largely around visions of the resurrected Jesus. The orthodox began to claim during the latter part of the first century that only the visions of the Eleven were definitive for Christianity, that the apostles alone were the designated witnesses of the flesh-and-blood resurrected Jesus who had gone to heaven and would never again be seen until the end of the world. Their successors, the bishops, supposedly inherited their mantle of authority, and no other spiritual experiences, whether of gnostics or others, were to be accepted as real revelations. This gospel indicates that such was not the case in the early Church--those "in the pews" had important things to teach the "leaders."

2. The disciples are not on a "religious journey," like Paul's missionary journeys, when they encounter Christ--they are walking away from Jerusalem, the abode of the Eleven. Christ comes to us in ordinary times, not only when we celebrate the Eucharist, but when we, like these disciples, are going home to dinner. The meal the disciples share with Jesus in their home is obviously symbolic of the Eucharist, but it is important to note that this meal Jesus shares with them is not a Eucharist because no transubstantiation takes place. The early Church considered evening "love feasts," Christians breaking bread together, to be very important, in addition to Eucharists, which, like Leviticus-mandated cereal offering ceremonies, were celebrated in the

morning. So they have encountered and recognized Christ not in a sacramental setting, but rather in the context of an ordinary meal shared with friends.

3. The disciples encounter Christ when they are discussing him together. Communities are all-important. An African proverb says that the strongest man cannot break a big bundle of sticks but a young child can break all the sticks individually. There is great power in searching together and breaking bread together.
4. The disciples encounter Christ unexpectedly when they meet a stranger who they think doesn't know anything. This story counsels us to be open to insights from those outside of our religious traditions, ethnic groups, etc.

In conclusion, we ought not to be afraid to teach those who we think know more than we do and learn from those who we think know less than we do because in each case the wisdom to be learned comes not from within the "teacher," but from deep within the psyche of the "student." Let us be open at all times, not just "religious" times; we encounter Christ in the Eucharist on Sunday mornings, but, on the way home from church on some Low Sunday or on some other Sunday or on some weekday, we just might meet a stranger who seems not to know what's going on, someone not Catholic or not Christian or not "spiritual" or not something else--Who might that Stranger be?

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