

The Walk to Emmaus and Three Mass Movements

Third Sunday of Easter – April 26, 2020

Acts 2:14, 22-33; 1 Pet 1:17-21; Lk 24:13-35

“They told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread” (Lk 13:35)

Prologue: Luke’s gospel narrative—‘The Walk to Emmaus’—can be interpreted in two broad ways: (a) As a spiritual journey of the two disciples who progress from disbelief to belief and from hopelessness to hopefulness when they encounter Jesus. It’s also regarded as Luke’s catechesis on the Eucharist. Let’s take the latter approach and trace ‘Mass Movements’ referring to the dynamics of the ‘Mass’.

Three Signposts—or ‘Milestones’—from Scripture:

1. 1st Movement: The Breaking of the Word: The narrative begins with two disciples going to a village named Emmaus; one of them is called Cleopas and the other is nameless. Does Luke intend the reader to get firsthand experience of the events by imagining himself or herself as the other one? Perhaps. It will surely help if one imagines oneself to be the anonymous disciple. The story continues: “Jesus himself came up and walked with them.” It’s not the two disciples who invite Jesus as co-traveler, but Jesus himself enters their doubt and darkness and walks with them. But, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (v.16). Why? Possibly they were blinded by disbelief and doubt, Jesus’ death shattering their hopes and dreams. Nonetheless, true to his promise, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them!” (Mt 18:20) Jesus *is* with them. Drawing out the reason for their despondency, Jesus rebukes them mildly, saying: “You foolish men! So slow to believe the full message of the prophets!” He then begins to “break the word” to them, explaining to them God’s word, which they had heard but not understood; read, but not believed; preached, but not practised. Knowing that these two disciples—and all the others as well—did not expect a ‘suffering saviour’ or a ‘crucified Messiah’, Jesus explains how: “Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory” (v.26) Basic to ‘breaking of the word’ (Scripture) is ‘breaking of God’s Word, Jesus,’ whose resurrection can only be grasped in the light of his passion, crucifixion and death.
2. 2nd Movement: The Breaking of the Bread: As they drew near Emmaus, they offer him hospitality with genuine concern: “Stay with us, for the day is far spent!” So far the ‘movements’ have been more Jesus’ than the disciples’. Now, the disciples make the move of playing host, suggestive of oriental hospitality (Gen 18:4-5; 19:2-3; Acts 16:15). Don’t we in India believe: “*atithi devo bhava*’ believing the guest to be a divine avatar? Jesus shared scripture with them, and they share their bread, signifying their resolve to enter into food-fellowship with him. But the divine guest once again takes the initiative and, “when he was at table with them, he *took* the bread, *blessed* and *broke* it, and *gave* it to them” (v.30). Luke uses Eucharistic language not necessarily to show that Jesus meant to celebrate the Eucharist, but to show that He is recognized in the ‘breaking of bread’. “And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (v.31). The ‘broken bread’ becomes eye-opening symbol of their Lord’s ‘broken body’ that was outcome of his scandalous table-fellowship with tax collectors and sinners. Broken bread symbolically seems to swallow Jesus: He vanishes, just as mysteriously as he appeared to them on the road.

3. 3rd Movement: Readiness to Break One's Body: Having recognized the crucified-risen Lord Jesus, now vanished, they say to each other: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?" (v.32). Notably, though it's late, they're hungry and have decided to retire for the night, "*That same hour* they got up and returned to Jerusalem" (v.33). Jesus' 'Mass' (Latin, *Missa*, 'sending') moves them with evangelical haste to Jerusalem to proclaim resurrection news. This trip—with sagging spirits—from Jerusalem to Emmaus, and its turnaround from the inn back to Jerusalem—with soaring spirits—ought to trace the trajectory of everyone who celebrates the Eucharist nourished by God's Word and with the Bread of Life. However, it's not enough to be nourished at two tables (of the Word and of the Bread), but one must go out into the world—the symbolic 'Jerusalem'—where one must be ready to be like bread, broken to nourish others. All of Jesus' disciples who were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed" (v.34) were ready to be broken, beaten, crucified and killed to give witness to their Lord and Saviour, Jesus.

Linking the 1st and 2nd Reading to the Crucifixion-Resurrection Theme:

The first reading—Peter's address to the multitude at Pentecost—shows how much Jesus' denier-disciple is transformed into a most daring one who accuses those who crucified Jesus. Nonetheless, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses" (v.32). Peter's witnessing "cuts the heart" (v.37) of people, three thousand of who will be baptised that day itself.

The second reading from the first Letter of Peter reminds Christians of Jesus' teaching that God is *Abba*, Father, who loves his children but is also a judge who will dispense justice. But this is no cause for fear since Christ becomes a "lamb without blemish" and offers up himself as perfect expiation for sins. "Through him [Jesus] you have confidence in God" (v.21) for he has ushered in a new covenant of self-sacrifice, interiority, selfless giving. Through and in him, we are saved.

Three Current Concerns:

The Jerusalem Concern: Besides being a centre of great religious significance, Jerusalem can be a bipolar symbol. On the one hand, it symbolises religious, economic, political and social power, and on the other, it's also a centre of evil, lies, denial, betrayal, bloodshed, abandonment, crucifixion and death. The disciples were enthusiastic to go to Jerusalem for all the wrong reasons; and, once again, Cleopas and his companion were hastily leaving it, again for the wrong reasons: disappointment, failure to cope with reality, hopelessness. What/Where is 'Jerusalem' for you?

The Emmaus Concern: Emmaus marks an 'escape route'. Escapes can be both, positive or negative. One can escape by seeking a 'high' in drugs, alcohol, internet obsessions, shopping or overindulging in amusements or can seek 'depth' by isolating oneself in a chapel, hilltop, seaside, etc., to be in contact with God, nature and one's deepest self. What/Where is your 'Emmaus'?

The Concern of 'Mass Movements': During these days of Covid-19 lockdown, many have become aware of 'Mass movements' of another kind: some 'watching Mass' online, other longing for Holy Communion; still others content at not having to 'go for Mass' at all. Moreover, we've seen 'Mass movements' of stranded daily wage earners, unskilled workers, migrants, etc., walking to far-flung villages without any assistance. How do I/We respond to these 'mass movements'? Can I do more?

Prayer: "*Come in, stay with me, Lord, for my days are far spent; and I need You; You alone.*" [End]