

Third Sunday of Easter
26th April 2020



Dear Friends in Christ,

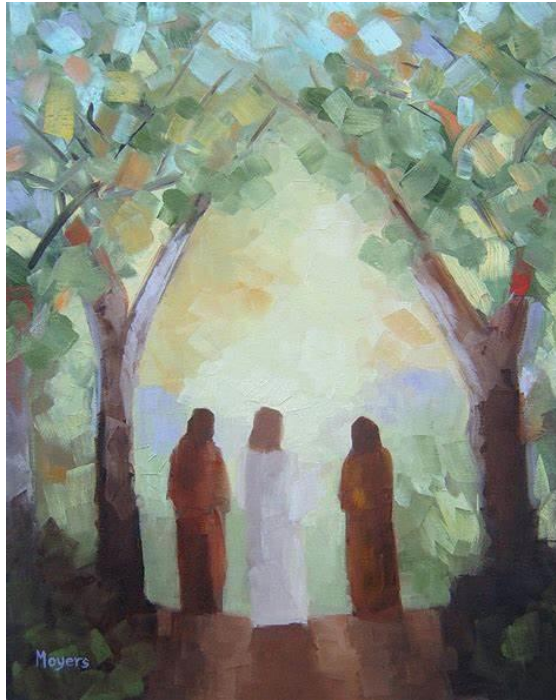
'What are you discussing with each other as you walk along?'

(Luke 24: 17)

How apposite these words of Jesus to the disciples walking to Emmaus on that first Easter Day, as they are to our contemporary lives! I write to you in a week where the world has watched with incredulity as President Donald Trump suggested at a stateside Coronavirus briefing that, as surfaces wiped with bleach solution became virus-free, people might *also* be cured by an injection of disinfectant. Not only was this a shocking indictment of the President's intellect, it is simultaneously an irresponsible misreading on his part of the desperate lengths people might go to in order to rid themselves of COVID-19. I wonder how many suggestible people might feel desperate enough to try it? I stress this is NOT viable – it WILL kill you!

Many commentators and individuals across the globe have renewed their calls to have Trump removed from power as a result of his latest gaffe. Shockingly for people in this cohort, many hundreds and thousands of Americans continue to trust Trump and are prepared to overlook his indiscretions because of his election promise – not only to make America great again, but to turn around the economic prospects of the many for whom unemployment and poverty have become the norm. Their preparedness to trust the highest Office into the hands of a volatile narcissist speaks deeply into the despair and desperation of their predicament. As difficult as I find this to write, it also has to be acknowledged that many voted for Trump because of his Christian faith.

Yet, in this latter point, I should not be so hard on Donald Trump. In Luke's Gospel today, we hear Jesus himself needing to enlighten His disciples in the way of truth. He asks them *'What are you discussing with each other as you walk along?'* As has been happening throughout our journey to the Cross and beyond, Jesus is again reminding us that not everyone who looks actually sees what is going on.



'Emmaus Road' by Mike Moyers

On that first Easter day, we join two of the disciples of Christ, bewildered and in grief, angry and lost, walking the dusty road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Earlier in Chapter 24 of Luke's account of the Resurrection, we have heard how Peter goes home after seeing the empty tomb. Here, we find two other disciples possibly walking to their own homes, filled with questions and doubts about what has happened. As they walked, Jesus physically journeyed with them. Such was their sense of bereavement and confusion that, like Mary outside Jesus' tomb earlier that same glorious day, these two close friends of Jesus did not recognise the very one they so longed to see one last time, even as He joined their group – not until later that evening, when Jesus broke bread with them and their and their lives were transformed. Interestingly, Luke helps us to see that the empty tomb itself wasn't the precipitating event for any of the disciples' eyes being opened to Jesus' resurrection. Instead it was Jesus' appearances *afterwards* which helped those who were closest to Him to see the truth and change the confusion of their conversations into the enlightened dialogue of conviction at His victory over death.



'The Emmaus Road' by Daniel Bonnell

In his reflections from the Psalms, C S Lewis wrote:

On that famous journey to Emmaus [Jesus] found fault with the two disciples for not believing what the prophets had said. They ought to have known from their bibles that the Anointed One, when He came, would enter His glory through suffering. He then explained, from Moses (i.e. the Pentateuch) down, all the places in the Old Testament concerning Himself. He clearly identified Himself with a figure often mentioned in the scriptures; appropriated to Himself many passages where a modern scholar might see no such reference. In the predictions of His own Passion which He had previously made to the disciples, He was obviously doing the same thing. He accepted, indeed claimed to be, the second meaning of Scripture.



The Road to Emmaus by Janet Brooks Gerloff

The story of these disciples, unnamed at the outset, could be our own personal story – particularly at times in our lives when we feel alone and vulnerable. I love that they are not named at this point: Luke is subtle in his empathy, highlighting how so often we are the ones who feel invisible to the world – left out of the conversations going on all around us. This beautiful painting by Janet Brooks Gerloff gives us a powerful insight to the presence of Jesus alongside us even when we are caught in the depths of despair. Even here, in the darkest points of our lived experience, Jesus is calling the confused dialogue of our panicked hearts and minds back to the only truth we could ever need – Him. The process of revelation comes out in the text of Luke's suspense-filled narrative as it builds to its crescendo. The name of Cleopas; the location of Jesus' visitation just seven short miles from the place of His crucifixion; His appearance mirroring Old Testament visitations of God-sent angels to Patriarchs and Prophets; the conversation which Jesus initiates – none of these incidents on their faith journeys make sense until the two recognise Jesus in that moment when He breaks bread with them. *'What are you discussing with each other as you walk along?'* Moving from ignorance to recognition, their minds are jolted back to those intimate hours before Jesus' death when they shared that other supper together. And now their conversation is bathed in the light of His truth as they learn to trust the burning feeling in their hearts as being the ignition of personal faith in their Saviour.



'Supper at Emmaus' by Velázquez

Throughout history, there have been many whose vision for the Christ has been so clear and unshakable that they have been prepared to suffer persecution even unto death in order to bear witness to His saving grace. On Thursday of this week, we have as a nation, rather quietly commemorated such a martyr, St George, our Patron Saint.

It is thought that George lived in the Holy Land at the beginning of the Fourth Century. He was a Roman soldier born to Greek Christian parents, and served under the command of Emperor Diocletian. He was greatly persecuted for his Christian faith. George continued to pray and to guide others to know Christ despite the consequence of suffering many tortures for being Christian. Time and again, his faith was tested, but he never stopped confessing the name of Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour.

We know that George suffered the same fate as his father who had also died for his faith. George was eventually martyred at Lydda - possibly in the year 304. After his death, he was hailed as *'The Great Martyr.'* When soldiers from England went out to spread the Gospel of Christ across Europe during the Crusades they heard of George's Christian faithfulness and brought the story of his life and service before God back to the UK. King Edward the Third made George the patron of the Order of the Garter, and as a result of this, George deposed Edward the Confessor as our Patron Saint.



Sculpture of St George slaying the fabled dragon in St George's Chapel at Romsey Abbey

In the hagiography, George was said to have slayed a mighty dragon to save the people from being eaten alive. This has always been a strange myth to have been attached to George, and it is difficult to teach our schoolchildren about St George's martyrdom and sainthood in his service of before God! It is more likely the '*dragon*' was a metaphor for George's military prowess in defending a powerless people from the horrific intensity of Diocletian's anti-Christian persecutions. There seem to be many stories about George. According to Wikipedia:

The tradition tells that a fierce dragon was causing panic at the city of Silene, Libya, at the time George arrived there. In order to prevent the dragon from devastating people from the city, they gave two sheep each day to the dragon, but when the sheep were not enough they were forced to sacrifice humans instead of the two sheep. The human to be sacrificed was elected by the city's own people and that time the king's daughter was chosen to be sacrificed but no one was willing to take her place. George saved the girl by slaying the dragon with a lance. The king was so grateful that he offered him treasures as a reward for saving his daughter's life, but George refused it and instead he gave these to the poor. The people of the city were so amazed at what they had witnessed that they became Christians and were all baptized.

The image, above, is of the sculpture I remember which used to hang above the Altar in St Georges Chapel in Romsey Abbey. However, in 2013, it was removed from the Chapel and has been replaced by a beautiful statue of *'Christus Rex'* made by the wonderful Peter Eugene Ball.



'Christus Rex' by Peter Eugene Ball

This image of Christus Rex, or Christ the King, draws my ramblings swiftly back to that dusty road to Emmaus, where Jesus reaches out to His confused disciples. His arms outstretched, Jesus welcomed them into the truth of His resurrection just as He welcomes us. Far from dead on the Cross, the Christus Rex depicts Jesus very much alive with His body whole and straight, not broken and defeated by death. Jesus' eyes are focussed on the beholder and His outstretched arms gather all who thirst to drink from the life-giving water of His redeeming grace. Jesus constantly seeks us out and draws us into His loving presence; transforming us by His broken body to live His risen life and shine His light to the world! He has risen, and so will we who believe.

The risen Lord meets us on the road to our personal Emmaus, in the experiences of our lives when we confront the many and varied dragons like Coronavirus which plague us, and in the places to which we retreat when we feel overwhelmed by the conversations going on around us which feel false and jarring – and in those claustrophobic situations which, like the scientists at Trump's briefing this week, we are unwittingly forced to be a part despite our own better judgement.

Brothers and sisters, the story of Emmaus confirms that Easter does not stop on that first night of the Resurrection, it journeys with us for the rest of our lives. Despite the physical isolation of our current predicament, let us now come together as the body of Christ, with our eyes also wide open to meet Jesus as He journeys alongside us; prayerfully seeking to live out His radical Gospel of love in humility and faith. The story of Emmaus confirms that Easter does not stop on that first night of the Resurrection, it journeys with us for the rest of our lives.

Yours, in Easter truth!

Jax

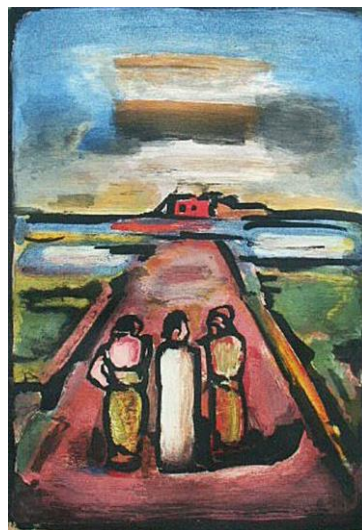
Revd Jax Machin, Rector, The Downs Benefice

Collect Prayer for the Week – The Third Sunday of Easter

Almighty Father, who in your great mercy gladdened the disciples with the sight of the risen Lord: give us such knowledge of His presence with us, that we may be strengthened and sustained by His risen life and serve you continually in righteousness and truth; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Collect Prayer for Saint George

God of hosts,
Who so kindled the flame of love in the heart of Your servant George,
That he bore witness to the Risen Lord, by his life and by his death;
Give us the same faith and power of love, that we who rejoice in his triumphs,
May come to share with him the fullness of the Resurrection,
Through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord,
Who is alive and reigns with You, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and forever. Amen.



The Walk to Emmaus by Georges Rouault

Luke 24:13-35 (NRSV) - The Walk to Emmaus

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' He asked them, 'What things?'

They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.'

Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.'

Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

