



Textile image of Vietnam

*Love is what carries you,
for it is always there,
even in the dark,
or most in the dark,
but shining out at times
like gold stitches
in a piece of embroidery.*

*—Wendell Berry
from the novel Hannah Coulter*

THIRD SUNDAY IN EASTER 26 APRIL 2020

Invitation to Prayer — Psalm 116:1, 2, paraphrased by Pamela Greenberg

I love you, God, for you listen to my voice,
my prayers for solace in times of need.
Because you lean your ear toward me with kindness,
I will call out to you all of my days.

Gathering Prayer

Gentle Companion who journeys with us our whole life long,
open our eyes and ears to your presence.
Make us eager to notice and willing to receive
you, in all we meet,
you, in every encounter.
In these moments, we quieten down our bodies and minds
that we might sense you near us...

(take a few moments to become aware of that which is within and around you)

Come, Spirit of Life,
sidle up beside us as we pray.
Awaken us to your love shining everywhere.
Amen.

Scripture Reading — Luke 24:13–35

You are invited to pause for reflection at the places indicated within the reading.

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.

Imagine yourself at this table. What do you see? What do you hear? What is the expression on Jesus' face as he gives you the bread?

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.

What is your conversation like now? In what ways, if any, has your mood shifted? What has made the difference for you?

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.

Going Deeper

In a homily on the Emmaus text, Michael Casey suggests it is primarily another story of epiphany. Drawing on the writings of Saint Aelred of Rievaulx, Casey identifies four possible channels of revelation or spiritual encounter:

- In some people, there is a deep and mysterious experience at the very heart of their being. A touch of God. An encounter with spiritual reality that actualises a deep desire to penetrate further into what has been so momentarily glimpsed. Sometimes this happens very early in life and generates a lifelong seeking after God that is not displaced by periods of indifference or even by substantial failings. Having tasted the goodness of God—be it ever so briefly—nothing else fully satisfies.
- In other people, an epiphany occurs when a word—spoken by another person or proclaimed in church or encountered in reading—generates a resonance deep inside that enables them to recognise their spiritual identity and to take steps to live in accordance with what they have heard.
- Sometimes the spark is struck by the example of another person's life, whether it be the result of a personal encounter or through reading. Seeing how someone else lives inspires a desire to follow their example as a way to attaining their own deepest personal fulfillment.
- Finally, for some people it is only when disaster strikes and their life is in ruins that they discover the possibility of living differently. When all the cherished projects that have long preoccupied them fall away, they discover something about themselves which has long been latent and now leads them into a new future. ♦

Spend a few moments reflecting on the ways you've gotten a sense of the sacred in your life. When have you caught a glimpse of Something More? Do one or two—or all—of Casey's channels for epiphany resonate for you?

What difference, if any, have these encounters made to you? What has been your response?

Michael Casey's homily concludes:

As we make our spiritual journey, Christ will almost certainly appear in a guise that we do not immediately penetrate and at a moment that we do not expect. That epiphany will fill us with delight and energy and change the course of our life.

Hold a few moments of silence and invite the Spirit to reveal recent epiphanies that have come to you—perhaps unnoticed until now.

Reflections in Solitude

You might read the reflection here and/or take time to meditate silently or contemplate what has arisen in your encounter with scripture.

Prayers of Intercession

*“There are no unsacred places;
there are only sacred places and desecrated places.” —Wendell Berry*

God in whom we live and move and have our being: in our contemplation, we are assured that your loving presence is through all matter and in every space and time; that, indeed, all things have the potential to reveal your glory and your tender love for us. Thank you for the gift of warmth and beauty we experience in spaces dear to us and in relationships of love and care. Thank you, too, for suffering and challenge that reveal the thread of your grace woven and shining even within our darkness.

Confident of your love for the world, we hold before you the desecrated places and weariness of our lives. We yearn for wholeness, mercy, peace and justice. We yearn for the self-giving love revealed in Jesus to flourish *in us* that we might be people of your healing, reconciling spirit. Hear us now as we pray for our world... for our land and all we love... for ourselves...

Disciples' Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.

Blessing

Let us rise from prayer
as those who have met the Holy One
in the silent dawning of this new day
and in the burning of our hearts
before the deep truth broken open before us.
May we live what we have received.

The love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ and the communion of the Spirit be with us all.

Cleopas and an unnamed companion leave the disappointment and crowds of Jerusalem behind and make their way back to the village of Emmaus. What went down with Jesus during the Passover Festival left them despondent and their stance before the stranger on the road said it all: *They stood still, looking sad.*

Where to from here? How shall they pick up the pieces? What will it be to return to “normal” life after all they’ve seen and experienced?



Image: Road to Emmaus, © Daniel Bonnell

Now that the curve of crisis has been flattened in Australia, we may be looking toward the future with a myriad of feelings and questions ourselves. Perhaps even new anxieties or a kind of reluctance to hope may be emerging. How will this experience have changed us? What can we expect going forward given the economic fallout and lingering health threat? What of our plans and dreams will we—and our children—be able to recover?

The horizon before us may appear daunting at points. We may be tempted to stand still ourselves, finding it all too hard to reorient ourselves to the new situation. Like the two companions on the road to Emmaus, our hearts may be equally slow in coming around to what God is on about in our current realities and we may wish to retreat into the familiar, even if it is no longer life-giving.

As the two companions found, that which may appear to be a dead end is, in reality, a space where God is present and active. But we must have eyes to see that another way is possible and the courage to move with the Spirit in new directions.

In his book *With Burning Hearts: A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life*, Henri Nouwen presents an image of the slowness of heart that prevented the two disciples from recognising Jesus and the way of death and rebirth he revealed. Nouwen tells of a meditation that was led by a presenter on TV. The presenter poured water on hard, dried-out soil, saying, “Look, the soil cannot receive the water and no seed can grow.” Then, after crumbling the soil with his hands and pouring water on it again, he said, “It is only the broken soil that can receive the water and make the seed grow and bear fruit.”

It is no wonder that it was in the breaking of the bread that Christ was finally recognised by Cleopas and the other. Beyond the obvious allusions to the Eucharistic meal, this story has me thinking about how Christ is often revealed in broken things. In my experience, when the pretence of our outer shell is cracked, it is then that we are able to catch a glimpse of the Holy within. Vulnerability is transparent.

For example, for me, a low and revealing moment came in the week prior to our final gathered worship as a congregation. Things were about to change, but just how much remained to be seen. In a teary conversation with a friend, I queried, “Who am I as a minister if can’t serve in the usual ways?” “Yes, *who are you?*” was his simple and wise response, bringing on more tears.

His question directed my attention away from external forms to internal being—which is what moved me then. *This is who I am, and with this God-created being, I will love wherever and however I can.* It was a holy moment, an epiphany.

Similarly, the Emmaus disciples caught a glimpse of the sacred in their midst and then, just as suddenly, it was gone from their sight. But the resonance lingered and it was enough to fill them with hope and cause them to reorient their lives.

As with the Eucharistic meal they shared, the bread which is broken is blessed and *given to us*. It is we who ingest and carry within us the Presence that is revealed. We who take responsibility for what will be after the breaking, after the revealing.

The image below by Janet Brooks Gerloff is worth pondering in light of the Emmaus story and this time in history. Much is being revealed for those who have eyes to see, those who can sense the presence of Something More companioning us. As with the figure in Gerloff's painting, that which is revealed most often comes in hints and whispers yet such experiences can leave a deep impression on us.



Image © Janet Brooks Gerloff

When have you sensed the Spirit sidling alongside you, bringing insight into how life might be?

What is being revealed to you in these weeks of isolation and social distancing?

As we anticipate the restrictions slowly lifting and we begin to emerge from our solitude, it may be tempting to take up automatically our former ways, including those that may not lead to life. I hope and pray we will have the courage to live as those newly oriented by what the Spirit has revealed in the breaking open and gifting of these unusual days.

“From too much love of living,
Hope and desire set free,
Even the weariest river
Winds somewhere to the sea—”

But we have only begun
To love the earth.

We have only begun
To imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope?
—so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?
—we have only begun

to imagine justice and mercy,
only begun to envision

how it might be
to live as siblings with beast and flower,
not as oppressors.

Surely our river
cannot already be hastening
into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot
drag, in the silt,
all that is innocent?

Not yet, not yet—
there is too much broken
that must be mended,

too much hurt we have done to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,

so much is in bud.