

Fr Robin Burgess writes:

Dear Friends,

It is not that long ago since we were caught up in election fever, and issues like leaving or staying in the EU, building a new runway at Heathrow, carrying on with HS2 seemed all important. Now we might wonder what the fuss was about. So many of the things we are ordinarily concerned with seem irrelevant in the face of the Coronavirus pandemic. How long will it go on? Will we survive? What sort of world will we emerge into? - these now are the all-important questions, alongside which nothing else matters that much. A friend wrote that she is simply trying to take each day as it comes and just live from day to day, which is probably a sensible approach - but the questions are still there and we cannot but wonder about them.

Our human situation is sometimes like that of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, the famous story that we hear in the Gospel reading for this 3rd Sunday of Easter. Cleopas and another - some say it was his wife, one of the many Marys - who had been followers of Jesus and had seen him die on the cross are returning to the small town a few miles from Jerusalem. We imagine it to be their home. Where else can they go? All their hopes and dreams are at an end: the great movement in which they were caught up is over with the death of Jesus. They have heard the rumours of some of their group going to the tomb that morning and finding it empty, but they do not know what to make of that. It seems only an idle tale: the idea of people coming back from the dead is so much outside normal Jewish ways of thinking.

And there Jesus is, walking alongside them, but - the Gospel says - something prevented them from recognising him, this man they knew so well - what could that be? As they go on they talk to him and gradually he opens their minds to accept the truth, that he is risen indeed! But it is only when they arrive at their home and invite Jesus to come in and break bread with them, it is at that moment that they know who

he is - but he immediately vanishes from their sight. This is one of the several mysterious features of the story. Is it saying that when we know Jesus truly, really in ourselves, we no longer need his physical presence? Maybe, and we can all know Jesus in that way even if we cannot receive him - for the time being - in his Eucharistic presence.

At once the two rush back to Jerusalem to share the good news with the other disciples: I imagine the outward journey as a slow weary trudge, but on the return their feet fly along the road and the seven miles go by in a trice. "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road?" they wonder. Something was stirring in them, leading them to see the scarcely credible truth, but only in retrospect could they realise it. So often in our lives we are not aware of what is going on at the heart of things, but looking back we can see and know that God was there, leading us through the darkness. When we come out of the current crisis, looking back we may be able to see how God is leading us now, which for the present we simply have to take on trust.

I used to know a gifted young man called Stephen, who produced several paintings and art works for the parish centre at Ealing abbey. I wanted to ask him to do a painting for a prayer room at Westminster Cathedral, where I was based at the time. He had moved away from London and gone to live in Walsingham and I went to see him there. We talked about possible subjects and it was he who suggested The Road to Emmaus.

On that occasion he told me things about his life I had not known before, that in his younger days he had been quite a tearaway, but discovered his talent for art and his faith at the same time - the two things very much went together. Stephen died aged only 40 after enduring a lot of ill health in his life, and The Road to Emmaus was one of his last works.

In fact, he did three versions of the scene, the last one a striking picture showing the two disciples (one of them looks like himself) crossing a bridge through a low incline from the hills of Emmaus on the left side to the holy city high up on the right, with

Jesus going before them. They are dragging behind them what looks like a great skull, a death's head, while the stones of the bridge suggest fragments of the Eucharistic bread. In the top half of the picture Stephen included small images of key figures in our religious history - Moses, Isaiah, Jonah (he was always fond of watery subjects) and John the Baptist.

It was the second version Stephen did of the scene that I liked most. It showed the two disciples enjoying their meal with Jesus in their home, but it was this last version that Stephen wanted us to have. Although not immediately as attractive, there is a lot in it to make one ponder. The skull-device is very prominent, and I think what he is wanting to suggest is that the disciples are too much burdened by the loss they have endured and so are unable to let go of their memories and allow Jesus to lead them on into his new life. I think it is the case that we can sometimes cling to what is really dead for fear of having to move into something new. A great spiritual guide of Ealing abbey called John Main said it is as if we are more afraid of resurrection than we are of dying!

Letting go is said to be the key to any spiritual growth, but it is extraordinarily hard to do. Memories, indeed all our thoughts and concerns, are, after all, important to us, a large part of our identity, our sense of who we are. But if we are living in the past all the time, clearly we are not in the present - and it is only in the present time and place where we are that we can be with God. He was in the past, but that is gone. He will be in the future, but that has not yet come. It is only in the here and now that we can know God and be with God.

Our present just now is so difficult for us - we wish it were not so, it seems like something we can only endure - but God must be just as much present now as he ever is. If we can allow ourselves to be here and now and not keep wishing it were something else, hard though that is to do, then and only then can we know God with us.

The new life of God in the risen Lord is always available to us if we can let go of everything else and simply rest in the present moment. And I think the more we can do that, the more we will find the strength and courage, the faith and hope, to endure and come through to what lies before us, when the crisis is over and we can get back to more normal life. We will be changed, however, and maybe we will through this time have been able to reconnect with what really matters, what is really important for us as human beings on our journey through life that takes us ever nearer to God.

Wishing you every blessing in Eastertide, Fr. Robin.

Fr Robin is happy to receive any comments or questions you may have. He can be contacted at robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk