

FROM FEAR TO WITNESS

STUDY TWO—THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR A

Acts 2.14a, 36-41

14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.

³⁶Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah,*—this Jesus whom you crucified.'

37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers,* what should we do?' ³⁸Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.' ⁴⁰And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.' ⁴¹So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

This week we return to Peter's sermon at Pentecost, jumping right to the end and noting its immediate effects. Peter's long sermon which is worth reading (2.14-40), is a little summary of what early Christians thought was essential to the message that brings joy and life to the hearers. It was clearly centred on the life death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth. So, it not a list of new debatable, philosophical ideas. It was not even about how good or bad Jesus' teaching was, or if he was a good example of a human being. It was about key events and critical claims he made before he was crucified. Those key events and critical claims were about himself in relation to God's purposes (God's mission). Peter says that that Jesus made himself the axis of God's mission.

That startling claim had to be backed up by God's word revealed in the long, turbulent history of Israel, especially the prophets and the Psalms. We do not read that in our lectionary portions but it was essential to the early Christians because it portrayed God's enduring, loving struggle with recalcitrant humans who wanted nothing to do with His purposes if that purpose did not suit their desires.

The end of the argument is that Jesus, crucified, is Lord and Messiah. The title Lord refers to God's majesty and right to rule the creation and Messiah describes the One who pursues and enacts God's purpose (mission) to rule his whole magnificent creation in the way it was intended; lovingly, justly, and in fellowship with human beings.

Question

What does it mean to you that the Lord and Messiah is also the crucified?

What does it tell you about God's mission and how it works?

Where does the authority for God's mission come from?

What would be the spiritual resources we need to do mission in the way of the crucified?

Peter's hearers realise that they are not being asked to enter an armchair debate but, in the face of the serious argument, they need to do something to put matters right between God

and themselves. After all, it is on these hearers' watch that the Lord and Messiah has been crucified. There is no blame nor hell-fire here for such an act, no desire for eternal vengeance, just the gracious, loving preaching of God's searching, prophetic word to bring them back home. Reconciliation and fellowship are the key.

The power of Peter's sermon is the Spirit. The Spirit speaks to human heart, raises the right question and sends them searching for the answers to their question. It is all too easy to forget this in our work. This story is not about Peter's preaching power, his great rhetorical flare, or the hearers' ability or great desire to save themselves from the mess they are in. Simply, the Spirit stirs the mind and turns the heart.

The outward signs are repentance and baptism all into the ownership of Jesus Christ, where forgiveness and the Spirit have their home. In the end it all comes down to the story of what happened and what it means for God's purposes for the world. Repentance is often linked to doing penance for our sins but it really means forgoing our desires and making Christ's desires our own. That is a whole other world. Baptism initiates us into that world along with others who long to do the same.

And it is for the whole world. Their generation was included whatever their hostility to this point in time, and their children to the end of the ages are included. God calls people to the crucified Messiah in the Spirit and word; they hear the word in the Spirit and the church is born.

Question

How can we learn to hear and listen to the Spirit so we know the right questions to ask?

How has the central part of the story impacted your life? Could you share that with someone else?

The crucified Jesus as Messiah and Lord is the axis around which God's purposes spin. What spiritual resources do I need to keep me focussed on Him?

1 Peter 1.13-25

¹³ Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. ¹⁴ Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. ¹⁵ Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; ¹⁶ for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'

¹⁷ If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. ¹⁸ You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. ²⁰ He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. ²¹ Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

²² Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. ²³ You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and

enduring word of God.*²⁴For

'All flesh is like grass

and all its glory like the flower of grass.

The grass withers,

and the flower falls,

²⁵ but the word of the Lord endures for ever.'

That word is the good news that was announced to you.

In last week's reading from 1 Peter, faith, joy, love and especially hope in the risen Christ were marks of the Christian. The sufferings of the present can be endured in that living hope.

The little word "Therefore" moves us from the past and future to the present. There are consequences to that hope, founded in the resurrection of Jesus, for the present time of turbulence, upset and change. Peter does not want to leave his hearers with the impression of a quiet life lived with at ease, meditating on the future heavenly inheritance. Real that future may be but disengaged from the present it is not.

The key to this passage is verses 15-16 so it introduces us to key theme; God's holiness and ours.

Question

In our world holiness means 'holier than thou' an attitude anathema to our society. Reflect on ways that the word holy is used and some of its meaning both negative and positive. What do you think?

Verse 16 is a quote from Leviticus 19.2. In Leviticus and the prophets holiness was the character of God. Sometimes it describes God's otherness from his created order as the Wholly Other. The prophet Hosea describes it this way; "I am God and no mortal, the Holy One is in your midst." In the story of the call of Isaiah 6.1-7 best description is 'unapproachableness'. It is associated with the bright dazzling of glory, something that blinds even the eyes of the seraphim or angels that surround the throne in the vision of Isaiah. All these are attempts to explain in pictures and metaphors just how different God is and also how overwhelming that Presence is.

Human holiness is sometimes described as being separated to or consecrated to God. There is truth in that but it does not seem to get to the core of the matter. Sometimes human holiness is identified with the fulfillment of a code of ethics. Again, there is truth in that, but again I think it unsatisfactory as a complete explanation.

Because God is Wholly Other, whose thoughts and ways are way beyond what we can imagine, human holiness is the disposition to seek those ways and know those thoughts for every situation in which they find themselves. Holiness is to fully engage in the personal relation offered in the cross, to grow into it overcoming the separateness as we grown into Christ.

Holiness as described here means that discernment of God's different ways becomes a way of living, being and responding in the world of human affairs. It is consecration, deeply ethical beyond our imaginations and embedded in the practice of discernment.

Question

How significant is discernment for our purposes in carrying out God's mission? Is discernment the place where spiritual life and mission meet?

If the central part of our life is the disposition to seek and know God's otherness in every situation of our world how do we go about that business?

Let's start back at verse 13-14. Four significant disciplines are put forward. First is preparing the mind for action. The beautiful metaphor of girding up the loins, or tucking in skirts (ancient dress) into the belt to give freedom of movement and action for the work at hand, says it all. Well-equipped, flexible minds ready to work; that is the first requirement for discernment of the Wholly Other and holiness. Does that surprise you?

The second is the discipline of our attentiveness. The old translation was "be sober", with emphasis on alertness and steadiness of thought that will not allow ourselves to be distracted or get lost in a fog of mindlessness. Discernment and holiness are quickly drowned.

The third is to live in the hope of Jesus loving grace; really live it. It is a key to discernment. Peter will drive this home in this letter.

The fourth is to begin to live in our discernment of God's holiness (a whole other way of seeing things) by being obedient to our discernment. We can be easily swayed by past ways that were ignorant of God's way of seeing things (we have always done it this way).

So here are four disciplines that Peter proposes; flexible, well-equipped mind, critical attentiveness, letting hope in Christ drive us and obedient to our discernment.

Question

What do you make of these? Remember these were proposed for ordinary folk by and ordinary man in a trouble, agitated world. Peter is not talking to priests, theologians or monks although they should take note!

If those are some disciplines then what should our actions look like? That is the next part of the story that this passage pursues (14-23). Peter sets the motives and actions that are demanded by a life of living hope that discerns God's holiness.

The warp of the Christian life is made up obedience and holiness which we have already discussed. He adds the fear of God which not about terror as in a horror movie. If we are discerning God's holiness and perhaps discerning God's otherness in every way, it is unsettling to say the least, but it is a place of awe and wonder.

He finishes with the one discernment of holiness we share; the passionate love of each other. Verse 22 is one of the more urgent and passionate expressions of the demands that love of each other places on us. Humility must be our constant companion.

Why does the Christian life look like this?

God is holy. We have discussed this a little already. The consequence of this holiness is that God cares so much for his creation he judges all. The holy God treats human beings with utmost respect and justice. They are agents of his care for the created order. There is no wink wink, or nudge nudge justice here. No collusion with wealthy or powerful. His creation means too much to him for that. We call this judge Father. An intimate name. A name that speaks of God's separateness and intimacy all at once.

God's holiness redeems us in the mystery of Christ's death and restores us in the power of the resurrection. That is something we could never have discerned because of God's otherness. Furthermore, this redemption is a new birth in which we share. Redemption is not a transaction that gets us into heaven. It places us in the very life of God now. We have the inestimable privilege of a new life that invites us to discern the very holiness of God.

Question

This passage simple in its prose, but breathtaking in its theological and spiritual breadth, asks us to stop. Clearly, God's mission and the foundational spirituality in God's holiness will speak to each of us separately. How has this spoken to you? Are there issues you might need to address?

Luke 24.13-35

13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles* from Jerusalem,¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them,¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.¹⁷ And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad.*¹⁸ 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?'¹⁹ 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,²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.²¹ 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.²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning,²³ 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.²⁴ 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.'²⁵ Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah* should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?'²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.²⁹ 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.³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.³² 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?'³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.³⁴ They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!'³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Many years ago an Australian film titled *Don's Party* portrayed a group of progressivist people seeing their progressivist political party lose resoundingly to a very conservative one in a general election. Devastation, grief, loss of hope, grounded in the numbing effects alcohol turned their party from expectation to disaster.

The walk to Emmaus has overtones of *Don's Party*. The talk, the sadness, the loss of their only hope all shattered by the empire and its colluding powers. So much had relied on this leader, one Jesus of Nazareth, who had shown all the signs of a great prophet and more. Indeed, it seemed as though God was with him in word and deed; even more, it looked like Israel's future hope was assured. It seemed God had returned in answer to their prayers and the great empire was facing its nemesis.

Jesus was as dead as the stone in which he was entombed. That they knew for certain and there was no coming back from that.

The great empire had instead cruelly won and all was shattered. Oh yes, some women went to the tomb to do the proper thing and spoke to some angels (of all things) who said he was alive. Some of the men went to check the story (as they should with hysterical women !!!) and, while the women's report of the empty tomb was correct, there was nothing else.

Who is this stranger who does not appear to have heard of this ruckus?

This is the *Don's Party* section of the story. What happens next takes them beyond anything they have ever known. It is the 'unknown, alternative finale' to Don's Story.

Question

Reflect on the differences between the women, and their encounter with the angels at the empty tomb, their faithful witness to the testimony given to them, and the incomprehension of the men. What might that tell us about the spirituality needed for discerning God's mission?

The stranger falls in beside them. Instead of displaying empathy and being a good counsellor he challenges them, rather brutally. He confronted the lack in discernment with a sharp and critical analysis of their underlying disposition.

They are foolish; ouch. Foolish here does not mean moronic or stupid as it might in modern colloquial English but obtuse, so they lack the sensitivity of mental alertness and acuteness. You might say that they have not listened all the while Jesus has been with them nor watched his 'performative teaching' of miracles, exorcism, and feedings all illustrating that the kingdom of God was at work. They had seen and heard the mission Dei but missed it entirely.

So, more education is not really the issue. Their need has to do more with the heart, and that requires more than re-education. They need to explore and reassess the commitments, dispositions and attitudes that shape, condition and determine their way of life. They miss God at work in his mission, not because they didn't see or hear it but because they lacked the disposition, the discernment, to embrace the 'really real' as opposed to the 'perceived real'.

The 'perceived real' was that Jesus was well and truly dead. No amount of hearsay evidence from the mouths of women, (uncorroborated by males, to boot) about angels and empty tombs would persuade them. They thought he would be the Messiah of Jewish nationalist expectations who would redeem Israel from gentile colonialism and oppression. Somewhere

in here, among the debris of failed politics, oppressive and thus misleading gender stereotypes, common sense certainties about death and who has the power over it, were their dispositions. But most all, who ruled the world? God or Rome?

To begin the change of perspective by exposing our blocking dispositions (by the way, this is what repentance means; a lot more than confessing trivial moral peccadilloes) he begins with God's story. We do not know what specific scriptures Jesus used here and that has properly created a great deal of speculation and academic debate. Perhaps the best way to gain a sense of scriptures used note the scriptures that the writers refer to as you read the New Testament. The most extensive quotes and exposition come from Isaiah and Psalms. But here it is the pattern of Moses and the prophets that matter; suffering and rejection and sometimes death is their destiny. The scripture story is the first point of re-orientation.

The centre of that story, the focal point was that it was necessary "that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory." Somehow, they missed that. The cross was not a cause for dejection but necessary for the liberation of the world. In his suffering and resurrection Jesus embodies the fulness of salvation that is, by the standards of the "perceived real", upside-down and inside-out. His death is the critical point of the divine-human struggle over how life was to be lived; in humility or self-glorification. He is rejected and put to death. People and politics exercise their ultimate to keep their dream of the 'percieved real' alive. God raises him up. Death is done. Politics cannot save us. It exercises the power of death.

Then they share a meal. They share each other's company. The exploration of discernment and mission is best done in shared company over a meal. Mission and spirituality are not individualistic endeavours (although they are deeply personal); they require the social cement of loving relationships.

Then comes the important part. The recognition of the risen Lord, the God who overturns 'perceived reality' as he breaks bread at the table. The Presence among. God among his people; the new Temple. They must come to this point each for themselves. Hearts burning with the scripture story are necessary, fellowship around the table in sharing 'our daily bread' is also necessary, but the recognition of the living Presence is essential to change everything.

In some circles this part of the story has created controversy. Is the meal just a meal in a motel dining room or really a reference to the Eucharist? I am going to suggest both and more.

'Give us today our daily bread', not simply because food is fuel but because it is also the centre of family and social life. Jesus spent many hours with disciples and friends 'breaking bread', sharing a meal to share a common life of journeying and conflict, a life of faith and fear, joy and loss.

If we read the scriptures we discover that feasting is also part of the great banquet of the Messiah's people. It is an evocative parabolic metaphor of the great celebratory joy of the loving fellowship of the kingdom. In that banquet the Presence is real beyond measure and it is that Presence from whom the joy and love flow.

Weekly we gather for the broken bread. Here the presence of the risen Lord is among us, not just within us. Here is the point of revelation week by week, the opening of our eyes to the 'really real'. In the ordinary everyday stuff of bread and wine the presence of the Triune

God meets us and reveals under the 'perceived real' of the ordinary that which is 'really real'.

The departing Jesus leaves the disciples with no commission but what they have learned from this encounter is to articulate the reality of the divine presence in their midst, transforming them in the process. They return to Jerusalem and find the community, men and women, buzzing with excitement just as they are. They had left Jerusalem with hopes dampened and return bursting with joy. The Risen Lord is the centre of a new community as Simon has discovered for himself. The women were right all along. Their new creed is "The Lord is risen indeed...". They are witnesses to the great revelation.

Question

Why did they miss what God was doing? If I read the story aright they saw what Jesus was about, so what created their lack of discernment?

I have illustrated some of their blocking dispositions. Can you see more? How do they speak to you?

What difference does an encounter with the Risen Christ make to these disciples?

What would be a central theme of the story of God's missional activity in our world? How can we witness to that?

Throughout these readings we have found hints about what helps and what hinders discernment in the Christian life and thus in mission. Bring them together and take time to reflect on how they might impact your life. What would your prayer be?

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