

## **LEAVING THE CHURCH OR STAYING? 3RD SUNDAY EASTER (A)**

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For many of us life is a series of changes. Some of these are forced upon us, others freely chosen. We decide, for example, to move to a new suburb, look for a new job, replace our old car with a new model, go on a diet, enrol the children in a different school, or support a particular charity. When we make such decisions we usually do so with expectations that the changes will work out, and that our lives will be so much better and happier. But things don't always work out so well. As a proverb puts it: *'Man proposes but God disposes!'* Sometimes, in fact, all our efforts to change situations bring failure, frustration, disappointment, discouragement, and disillusionment.

This is just what happened to those two disciples with the sad faces whom we meet in the gospel today. To their credit they have previously responded to the invitation of Jesus to be his friends and workmates. They have learned a great deal from him about the meaning of life. They have shared his work of teaching and healing. They have enjoyed his company and accomplished a great deal of good. As the influence of Jesus has spread, they have been filled with hope for a better world for everyone - a kingdom world of justice, peace, and joy.

Now, however, this has all come to an abrupt end. For in these past few days Jesus, their beloved Leader and Teacher, has been arrested, tried, sentenced, tortured and killed. Now they are feeling that without his presence, his inspiration and guidance, his support and encouragement, they simply cannot go on. So disappointed and so disillusioned are they about Jesus in fact, that they have even decided to leave the Church, the community of his followers. This is just what they are doing when we catch up with them today. Slowly but surely they are walking away from it all. Slowly but surely they are putting Jerusalem and the other disciples behind them. They are heading to the village of Emmaus, some seven miles away, to start a new and different way of life.

It is within this situation of disappointed hopes and broken dreams that Jesus re-enters their lives. Not simply as Jesus of Nazareth this time, but as the Risen Lord, powerful and empowering! As they trudge along the road, with their eyes downcast and their shoulders hunched, they start chatting to each other about all that has happened. All of a sudden Jesus himself joins them, but they do not recognise him at first. But they answer all his questions with the basic facts. They add that they have even heard a rumour that he is no longer dead but alive. Yet while they know and recall the basic facts about him, they have no idea how to join the dots. They need Jesus to explain to them from the scriptures that the Messiah would gain victory and glory only through suffering. So influential and impressive is Jesus' explanation of the facts that later they say to each other: *'Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us along the road...?'*

By now the sun is setting and they've reached their destination. Jesus pretends to go on. They have enjoyed his company so much that they plead with him to stay with them. He graciously accepts their invitation. There at table their guest becomes their host. He takes bread, says the blessing over it, breaks the bread, and gives it to them. Just as he did at the Last Supper! There and then they recognise him for who he is.

More than that, they immediately reverse their previous decision. They turn around and go back to the other disciples in Jerusalem. They go home to the Church they have so recently left.

In recent years there have been changes in the Church throughout the world. While wanting more, some people have embraced the changes. Some have resisted them. Some have struggled to understand what is happening and why. Some have simply walked out.

What we all need in these times of change is stronger faith, stronger faith in the on-going presence of the Risen Lord to his Church. We need this stronger faith and the hope and love that go with it, especially when we come together at the Eucharist to celebrate his presence and influence.

Our Risen Lord is with us right here right now, in ways that match his presence to his disciples on the way to Emmaus. He is here in the midst of our gathering. He is here as he tells his story and ours in the readings and the homily. And he will be here among us very shortly in our Eucharistic meal of bread and wine. He will be here among us, as both our host and nourishment for the next stages of our journeys of life.

May we welcome him, then, with trust and love, and with our minds and hearts and lives open to his powerful influence! May we welcome him as he comes to us today, comes to us in the mighty power of his Spirit, his other self!