

CHRIST'S PRESENCE WITH US

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 30th April 2006

Today's gospel reading is one of the church's favourite post-Easter readings. It tells of one of several post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, some of which were to individuals, some were to a crowd, and this one being an appearance to his apostles. Immediately prior to this, Luke has told us of how Jesus came alongside the two people walking on the road to Emmaus. In that incident, and in the incident recorded that we heard read from in today's Gospel passage, Jesus gives reassurance that he is real and confirms that he is not a ghost. He also "opens their eyes" and talks to them about how the Scriptures have now been fulfilled.

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### **"Faith Illuminates"**

*Helmut Thielicke, in "Christ and the Meaning of Life"*

The disciples could never have been persuaded to believe that the dead Jesus had risen from the grave if they had not believed His Word. Even the empty grave did not bring the disciples to faith. Only after Jesus opened the Scriptures to them did the scales fall from their eyes and did they realise how many dotted lines in the life of the Saviour pointed to and intersected at this point where the event of Easter burst upon them.

It was as if hitherto they had seen the coloured windows in the sanctuary of this unique life only from the outside. The panes were dark and the language of the picture was obscure. But when, by the Word, they were transported to the interior of this mystery, the pictures sprang into life and took on sight and speech.

What had seemed grey to them before, the mute, empty meaninglessness of which had plunged them into the panic of Golgotha and caused them to doubt everything, now became for them an eloquent and compelling thing. Suddenly they realised that He had come from the eternity of the Father to share for a little while their life on earth.

*(Quotation ends)*

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In a number of the resurrection stories, those who encountered Jesus did not immediately recognize him. How is it that you can have the risen Christ with you, walking and talking with you, and yet be unaware of it, and simply not recognize him?

Part of the answer may be expressed in the universal human phenomena known as "not being able to see the wood for the trees." In other words, when we see too much of something, we end up not noticing it at all. We become oblivious to it. It seems to merge into the background of normality. And now even more than in the first century, we are so

conditioned by dazzling marketing finding ways of grabbing our attention, that what merges into the background of normality has little chance of being noticed.

The risen Christ is with us always. He walks with us on every road. He is with us at the heights of joy and celebration and he is with us in pain and despair. His Spirit is in the very air that we breathe. His presence is the glue that holds the cosmos together. If God's Spirit was withdrawn, everything that is would disintegrate back into dust and chaos. There is absolutely nowhere you can go and nothing you can do without being in the living presence of the risen Christ.

But that which is always and everywhere present quickly slips beyond our awareness and just becomes the taken-for-granted background that we ignore as we live our lives. And so Christ walks with us on the road or sits with us at the table and we fail to recognize it.

How can we re-attune our awareness so that we become increasingly conscious of Christ's presence with us? These post-Resurrection readings offer a message of hope.

Jesus' apostles have just been told about what happened to the two walking on the road to Emmaus, and how he ate with them, and opened the Scriptures up for them to understand everything that had happened. Then he confronts the apostles, who are startled. Jesus refers to his hands and feet – his wounds from the cross – and invites them to touch and see that he is not a ghost. Then he eats with them and also teaches them from the Scriptures.

As in the Emmaus Road story, as the scriptures are read and discussed, something stirs inside them and there is no longer any doubt, they recognize Christ with them.

When Christ is present always, everywhere and in everything, the only way we are going to reawaken our awareness to see, is by taking particular times and particular places and particular things and deliberately concentrating our attention to perceive God. You see, in theory, because God is everywhere, there is no need to come here to a church building to worship God. And because God is always with us, there is no need to set aside particular times to worship.

But the reality is that for most of us, if we don't set aside special times and places to give our attention to God, we will be oblivious to God's presence. But the hope is, and the testimony of many people is, that if you regularly take time to focus your attention on the presence of the risen Christ in particular scriptures and particular bread, at a particular table, in a particular church at a particular time, then you have a good chance of growing towards the level of awareness in which you will recognize the presence of the risen Christ in all bread, in all matter, in all people, at all tables in all places.

That's why we gather together bringing with us the fears and desolations of our world, the dashed hopes and shattered dreams. The Word is opened to us. We are invited to gather together round a table. God is thanked and praised and the bread is broken and

distributed. We are again made aware of Christ offering himself to us. And we are sent out in joy to share with others the news that Christ is risen.

Even then, the ambiguity of our experience is reflected in the end of Luke's gospel story, as he disappears from their sight... The same thing happens again and again for us. Sometimes we see, and then our perception fails us again.

And then we are reminded that we will need to break bread again, over and over, because we need continued encouragement to see Christ always and everywhere.

As Christians, we are "People of the Resurrection". We are called to live in the light of the resurrection of Christ (light – being both figurative and literal). We have all the beautiful symbolism at the early morning Easter service of light dispelling darkness – and the challenge to live in the light of that – in other words, to shape our lives after our belief.

But that first requires that we come in person to the Risen Christ, in awe like the first disciples, or even like "doubting Thomas", that ultimately we may stand again before Christ and say with a similar sense of awe: "My Lord, and My God!"