

Today's Gospel reading takes us back to the evening of the first Easter Day. Two of the followers of Jesus are walking to a village called Emmaus. A long walk, some seven miles from Jerusalem. Imagine them trudging along, their faces downcast. Their leader, their teacher, their friend, was dead. All their hopes had been dashed.

Suddenly they are joined by a stranger, who wants to join in their conversation. They explain to the stranger that they had been talking about Jesus of Nazareth. How they had hoped that he would be the one to set Israel free, but he had been sentenced to death and had been crucified. How some women had found his tomb empty and had been told by angels that he was alive (in their society, the evidence of women was not seen as worthy of belief, so what they say is not taken very seriously); admittedly some of the men had found the tomb to be empty, but they hadn't seen Jesus. Perhaps it was some kind of cruel joke.

The stranger explains to them that if they read the scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) carefully, they would see that the Messiah had to suffer these things before entering into his glory, and then he goes through the scriptures, explaining them to the two disciples. What a sermon that must have been!

The disciples still don't know who the stranger is. They reach their destination and it looks like the stranger is going to continue his journey. Hospitality was and is important in that part of the world, and so (in a way we might perhaps struggle with in this country even when we not 'social distancing') they invite this total stranger into their home. Not a half-hearted invitation hoping he would say No and continue on his way, but urging him strongly to stay with them; night was about to fall.

They sit down to eat. The stranger takes some bread, gives thanks for it, breaks it, and gives it to them, actions reminiscent of what Jesus had done a few days earlier at what we call the Last Supper. At that moment, they recognise who the stranger is. It is Jesus. And then he disappears.

How can we have been so blind?, they ask themselves. Looking back on their conversation, they realise how their hearts burned within them as Jesus talked with them on the road and opened the Scriptures to them. This is reminiscent of John Wesley's conversion experience on 24 May 1738. He was listening to Luther's preface to the letter to the Romans. Wesley wrote in his journal, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death."

When we read the Bible, we should do so expectantly, allowing God to speak to us through its words. May we feel that same sense of complete assurance in God's love and forgiveness. May our hearts burn with a real sense of God's presence with us, and his love for us, as we read the Bible.

The two disciples rush back to Jerusalem to find the other disciples. The Eleven confirm that Jesus is alive and has appeared to Simon Peter. The two disciples tell the others what happened on the way to Emmaus, and how they recognised Jesus when he broke the bread. We may not be able to receive communion physically now, but as we worship in our homes we can still enter into a deep spiritual communion with Jesus, and recognise his presence with us.

While the disciples are talking to each other, Jesus suddenly appears amongst them. He greets them, 'Peace be with you.' Peace. Shalom. The peace that comes from healing and reconciliation. Imagine Jesus saying to you now, 'Peace be with you'. May that peace bring you comfort, hope and strength in these difficult times. Peace be with you. Amen.