

Sermon delivered by the Right Reverend Bishop David Hamid, Suffragan Bishop of the Diocese in Europe, at a Service of Confirmation and Holy Communion in Luxembourg on 6th April 2008, the Third Sunday of Easter.

Acts 2.14a, 36-41; Luke 24.13-35

One of my ambitions is one day to walk the pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostela. Years ago a colleague of mine took a month off to do just that. I was fascinated as she told me about the several hundred kilometres she walked over 30 days. She recounted every blister, but also the fellowship on the road, the varying quality of the lodgings, the interesting people she met from all over the world, and the final exhilaration of arriving at the great church and the shrine with the relics of St James the Apostle. Of course, if you just want to visit the shrine you can always fly straight to Vigo. You land quite close to Compostela – a much easier way to get there. But the thing about Santiago de Compostela is that the destination is not really the point. The point is the pilgrimage itself!

In the 1960s the Roman Catholic Church held a meeting of all its bishops. It was called the Second Vatican Council. The meeting reviewed and updated several teachings of that Church, and it issued a number of documents. One of them was about the Church itself. In that text the Church is described in a number of ways, but the paramount one, which was a beautiful and new expression, is that the Church is the pilgrim people of God.

I particularly like this description as it is not triumphalistic. It speaks of a Church on the move, humbly walking alongside humanity, aware of and in touch with the concerns of the human race. And if the Church is the pilgrim people of God, then you and I are *pilgrims*.

Today we have the Gospel story about an event just a week after the death of Jesus. A couple of disciples were talking and discussing the events that had taken place; they were sad and confused about the death of Jesus and needed to talk it over. It is quite likely were still in shock – post traumatic stress we would call it today. As they were talking to each other, trying to make sense of the events surrounding Jesus's death, Jesus himself, under guise of the stranger, joins them and comes alongside them. He listens to their sadness and confusion. They do not recognize him; in fact they are surprised that he does not seem to know about the events of the past week. They tell Jesus they had been hoping for a Messiah – a prophet mighty in deed and word. Then Jesus tries to talk with them about the scriptures and he points out that the Old Testament had borne witness to the fact that the Messiah was to suffer and die. But even with our Lord's skilled interpretation of the Old Testament prophets, they still did not recognise him.

It became late and they drew near to a house; they invited him in to eat and to rest. Just like pilgrims on the Santiago trail, at sunset they seek places to rest and eat. When they gather at the table, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. Then, at once they saw and knew who he was. It was only in "the breaking of the bread" that everything fall into place for them. Their hearts began to burn with excitement and they ran down the road, the same road they had been walking in sadness, and they tell

the disciples in Jerusalem that they Jesus was known to them was alive, that they knew him in the breaking of the bread.

It is a long story. It is probably the longest resurrection story we have in the New Testament. St Luke, today's Gospel writer, is fond of stories about journeying. Remember that he begins his Gospel with the journey made by Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Even as he writes about Jesus's earthly ministry, Luke has him on one long walk along the road, a pilgrimage from Galilee, south through Samaria to Jerusalem where he met his death. Luke wrote a second volume which we know as the Acts of the Apostles. In this volume the walk and journey continues – this time by the Church, the followers of Jesus – and we journey with Peter and then Paul around the Mediterranean. So it is no surprise that the name that Luke gives to Christians in the Book of Acts is “followers of the *Way*”. “People on the *Way*”. The pilgrim people – that is us.

In a few moments the candidates for confirmation will state before me their bishop that they desire to follow Christ who is the *Way*, the Truth and the Life. They will state that they want to join with the other pilgrims on the *Way*, and journey along the road which the Church is walking. You see we do not become Christians to find ourselves in a safe shrine or sanctuary. Christianity is fundamentally about a walk, a journey, a pilgrimage. Yes, we have an end point – Jesus has gone to prepare that place for us – but we do not arrive there immediately – the point of our calling as disciples is to walk together.

For St. Luke, the Christian life is described as the *Way* and Christians are journeying on the way towards Jerusalem, just as Jesus did. As we walk we are to listen to the Lord speaking to us in the events around us and in the people we meet. We learn to recognise Jesus in the strangers we encounter on the way, for every person you meet is Christ himself, even though you might not recognise them. This is why I ask the Confirmation candidates to promise solemnly that they will seek and serve Christ *in all people*, loving their neighbour as themselves. That is what we “people of the way” do – we love the stranger, we accompany them, we listen to them.

When I re-read this Gospel I thought of the old story about two fish who were swimming along together. One said to the other, “Pardon me, but you are much older and have more experience than I; can you answer a question? Can you please tell me where is this thing they call ‘the Ocean’? I’ve been looking for it for a long time and I can’t find it”. The older fish said, “The Ocean is what you’re swimming in!” The younger fish said, “Oh this? No, this is only water. What I’m looking for is *The Ocean*”. Then feeling disappointed, he swam away to search somewhere else. Like a fish swimming around in circles looking for the ocean, or like me turning the house upside down looking for my glasses when they are perched on my head – we disciples can be unaware that the challenge of living the Christian life is right before us, surrounding us, beside us.

Biblical archeologists have never found the village of Emmaus. The scripture says it is about 7 miles from Jerusalem so it should be easy to find, but we have never found this little place. I think it is because Luke wants us to understand that Emmaus is anyplace, anywhere we are on our daily pilgrimage, anyplace we meet our families, friends, and strangers, our work-places, our schools. In every place we pilgrims are to look for the presence of our Lord. Do not look for the Lord anywhere else than right in the midst of each day's journey!

And remember that we are on a pilgrimage and pilgrimages are often messy and unstructured. Pilgrimages are not precise military parades. Just read Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and you will realise how crazy and messy pilgrim walks are. But we meet the Risen Christ in the midst of the craziness of our daily lives and the confusion and mess of the world around us. As the disciples walked they were mystified by all that they had experienced. So likewise we might not be able to understand everything about what is going on around us; we may not have everything worked out. We Christians are not supposed to have the answers to everything, but it is precisely in this state of affairs that our Lord Jesus Christ seeks to be with us, comes to us, and walks with us.

The Church provides us with help along the way of our pilgrimage – one of them is the weekly gathering of God's people to break bread. As in any journey there needs to be time when we pause, take rest, have some nourishment and restore ourselves for the next stage of travel. The Church is one of these resting places along the route – where we find food for our souls to restore us for the journey. The same Christ we serve in the world sits down at table with us and gives us the food that satisfies our deepest hunger – his very Body and Blood. But we do not dwell here in Church – our encounter with the Risen Christ in the Eucharist is so that we can be better equipped to encounter him in the world. At the end of this service, the confirmation candidates will receive a lit candle. This, of course symbolises what happens to us through the Easter sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist – we receive the light of Christ. But right after they receive the candle, they are to walk out towards the world with me, for we come here to receive the light but not to hoard it. We carry it out to lighten our path and the path of all others journeying through this life.

Fellow pilgrims, let us walk the way of Jesus, who is the Way the Truth and the Life. Let us come alongside our brothers and sisters in all their confusion and daily craziness and talk with them and listen. Let us seek and find Christ in them, loving them as we love ourselves. Let us leave this altar each week with our hearts burning with Christ's love and let us be witnesses, shining like the lit candle bringing that joy and light and hope into a world that desperately needs it.