

Homily for April 14, 2002
Third Sunday of Easter

By Father Charles Bowes

Acts 2:14, 22-33
1 Peter 1:17-21
Luke 24:23-35

What happened to those early disciples happens to us each time we gather for Mass.

It seems so clear. When they were at a meal, the scripture account, Luke 24 says, “Their eyes were opened and they recognized him; whereupon he vanished from their sight.” But what really happened? Is the gospel reporting a supernatural experience, something like a vision? Some object to the idea of Jesus “materializing,” so to speak, appearing in a way that impinges on the eyes and ears, on the senses, and then withdrawing from that mode of appearance, or as the scripture says, “vanishing from their sight.” Is this how it happened? Is it a vision, and is the solution to disbelief a reference to God’s power?

Or is the gospel a sacramental account, written to tell us what happens each time we read the scriptures, or when they are opened for us by Christ, now teaching through his Church? And still more: is the

Emmaus gospel meant to tell us what happens when we break the bread of the Eucharist? Is it not then that we find ourselves in the presence of the resurrected Christ? Is this an historical event or instruction about what happens at Mass? Let scholars solve this argument, if they can.

The gospel could have both levels of meaning. It could be an historical event put in sacramental language – to remind us that through the sacraments, the event keeps on happening. The appearance of the Lord is not confined to an inn at Emmaus. The early Christians certainly believed this, because they began to use the term “breaking of the bread” for their worship. Jesus’ followers had gathered around many tables, and they were more or less religious meals: the Sabbath, the seder, and so on. But now when they gathered for a meal, as believers, they began to use the new term – the breaking of the bread.

There is no doubt that all New Testament writers used a sacramental or liturgical language each time they told of Jesus’ meals with his followers. Look up the various accounts of the feeding of the crowds in the desert. Read the Last Supper story closely. And the appearance in his risen life near Tiberias, by the lake of

Galilee, where he himself prepared the food. On each of these occasions the language in which they describe Jesus' actions sounds familiar.

The writers say he does four things with bread: he takes, blesses, breaks, and shares. We do that now. We take the offering of your gifts, we bless them in the consecration, break and share them in the communion. And we precede all of this with the proclamation of scripture and its interpretation, the homily. All of this is Eucharist, it is the Mass.

Notice what happens at this "Mass," this Eucharist at Emmaus: the climax comes when the disciples play host to Jesus and invite him to stay with them and share a meal. However, during the meal, Jesus becomes the real host and the disciples become the guests – even though it's their nickel that hired the table and bought the food! When Jesus breaks the bread, the disciples immediately recognize him as the risen Lord. However, they cannot possess him because he quickly vanishes from their sight. As disciples, they are not to possess the risen Lord; they are to proclaim him. And that is precisely what they do in the final verses: "They recounted what had happened on the road and how they had come to know him in the breaking of bread."

How well we understand the disciples' desire to hang on to Jesus and hunker down with him in some secure haven. But when we encounter him in the word of God and at the table of the Lord, our task is to go forth and proclaim him. That's what we're here for: to

become what we receive here – the Glorified Lord into whom the Father transforms us by the power of the Spirit. Instead of the food becoming changed into us, we're changed into it. This time after Easter is the time to remind all of us old-timers about that, and to instruct the new Catholics, the neophytes, in our Catholic worship practice.

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