

## May 8, 2011 - Third Sunday of Easter (A)

Readings for the Third Sunday of Easter (Cycle A):

1. Acts of the Apostles 2.14, 22-33

Psalm 16.1-2, 5, 7-8, 9-10, 11 Response: "Lord, you will show us the path of life." or "Alleluia"

2. 1 Peter 1.17-21

3. Luke 24.13-35

### Reflections on the Sunday Gospel Reading

by Bill Hunt

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In this gospel reading Luke, the storyteller, is at his best as he weaves the unforgettable tale of the two disciples who encounter Jesus on the way to Emmaus. For me it brings back memories of St John's Abbey and University in Collegeville, Minnesota, especially of Emmaus walks on Easter Monday<sup>1</sup>[\[1\]](#) and of the soulful Gregorian chant at Vespers during the Easter Season: "Stay with us Lord, Alleluia. For evening draws near, Alleluia."<sup>2</sup>[\[2\]](#)

With consummate artistry Luke weaves traditional remembrances into a theological narrative that ties his audience to the crucified and risen Lord. As Luke Timothy Johnson puts it: "Luke shows us how the risen Lord taught the Church to read the Torah as prophecy 'about him' . . . and how the process of telling and interpreting these diverse experiences begins not only to build a community narrative, but actually begins to create the community itself." (1991, 399)

A closer look at this story reveals how the crucified and risen Jesus helps Luke's community (and all subsequent Christian communities) to recognize him in the Scriptures of the People of Israel and in the Eucharistic celebration.

### Opening of Ears

Luke portrays Cleopas<sup>3</sup>[\[3\]](#) and his companion as residents of Emmaus about seven miles from Jerusalem who were followers of Jesus and were returning home after the pilgrimage to

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<sup>1</sup>[\[1\]](#) In the pre-Vatican II missal, this Sunday's Gospel was read on Easter Monday (*Liber Usualis* 1952, 787), giving rise to the practice of walking to a place about seven miles away, sharing a meal, and walking back on that day.

<sup>2</sup>[\[2\]](#) v. *Mane nobiscum Domine, Alleluia.* r. *Quoniam advesperavit, Alleluia.* (*Liber Usualis* 1952, 815)

<sup>3</sup>[\[3\]](#) "Cleopas" is the male form of "Cleopatra." It appears that this name was in Luke's source. If he had created it, he would have created the name of the other disciple as well. In the late fourth century Epiphanius identified Cleopas as Jesus' cousin and the second bishop of Jerusalem. Ninth and tenth century scribes named the other disciple "Simon" or "Nathanael." (See Fitzmyer 1985, 1563-1564; Metzger 1994, 158)

Jerusalem for Passover. Based on their reading of their Sacred Texts,<sup>4[4]</sup> they were hoping that Jesus “would be the one to redeem Israel,” that is to “deliver Israel from Roman occupation.” (Fitzmyer 1985, 1564) Jesus’ arrest and execution had dashed those hopes.

In an echo of the central part of Luke’s Gospel, the journey to Jerusalem, where Jesus instructs his followers while “on the way,” the risen Lord instructs the two disciples “on the way” to Emmaus. He opens up to them a whole new way of understanding the Scriptures,<sup>5[5]</sup> especially the notion of a *suffering* Messiah. (See Fitzmyer 1985, 1565-1566.)

Jesus’ suffering coupled with his resurrection forced his followers to re-read the Israelite Scriptures in a wholly new light. It is important to note that it is not just the resurrection that causes this re-reading. A leader who died honorably in war and who was subsequently raised up by God on the Last Day would have fit in with how Jesus’ contemporaries read the Scriptures. For example, that was the expected reward of the Maccabean martyrs. Jesus’ resurrection was different. It was not only a foretaste and proof of the general resurrection of the just but also a vindication of the unjust, even disgraceful, suffering of the crucifixion. (See Conzelmann 1961, 202, n. 3.)

The ambulatory seminar that Jesus the stranger conducts with the two disciples condenses fifty years of the Christian community’s growing awareness of Jesus’ death and resurrection as something in line with the Scriptures. Christianity is based on this revisionist reading.

### **The Hermeneutic Circle**

This new understanding of the meaning of Scripture is a good example of what contemporary theologians call the hermeneutic circle. The process begins with action based on one’s interpretation of the Scriptures. Cleopas and his companion were ready to follow Jesus as a political Messiah who would free them from Roman oppression. The death and resurrection of Jesus forced them to reconsider their position and re-interpret the Scriptures. This led them to a different understanding of what it meant to be the Messiah (suffering) and to a different understanding of the kind of commitment involved in a life of discipleship (healing and forgiveness).

The hermeneutic circle is a never-ending dialog between the Christian community’s understanding of Scripture and its engagement with worldly realities, especially evident injustice. It involves “a dialectic between biblical text and the social analysis.” (Tabasco 1984, 327) The fundamental option for the poor forces one to consider systemic oppression and its validating ideology, often based on a reading of Scripture that bears further scrutiny.

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<sup>4[4]</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer suggests passages such as Isaiah 41.14, 43.14, 44.22-24; 1 Maccabees 4.11; and The Psalms of Solomon 9.1 might have influenced this understanding of “redemption” in first century Palestine. (1985, 1564)

<sup>5[5]</sup> Luke refers to “Moses and all the prophets” in verse 27 and adds “the psalms” in verse 44. This is shorthand for the whole Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. The traditional division was into *Torah* (“The Law,” i.e. the first five books of the Bible), *Nevi'im* (“The Prophets” including the former prophets [Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings,] and the literary prophets both major and minor), and *Ketuvim* (“The Writings” including all the rest of the books such as the Psalms, the Proverbs, and Job.)

For example, already in the early fourth century Christians understood the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jewish People as a punishment for their rejection of Jesus as Messiah and Lord. They even saw predictions of this in the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, Eusebius of Caesarea writes about “[t]he calamities that immediately after their conspiracy against our Saviour overwhelmed the entire Jewish race.” (1965, 31) He sees this predicted in Lamentations 4.20: “In His shadow we shall live among the Gentiles.” (1965, 42)

This reading of the Scriptures prevailed throughout Christendom well into the twentieth century until confronted with its horrible consequences in the Nazi Holocaust. This caused Christians to question their reading of the Scriptures and to adopt a revisionist reading that demanded a much different stance toward the Jewish People. This revisionist reading is clearly evident in the Second Vatican Council’s “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.”

True, authorities of the Jews and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (cf. Jn. 19:6); still, what happened in His passion cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as repudiated or cursed by God, as if such views followed from the holy Scriptures. All should take pains, then, lest in catechetical instruction and in the preaching of God’s Word they teach anything out of harmony with the truth of the gospel and the spirit of Christ.

The Church repudiates all persecutions against any man [*sic*]. Moreover, mindful of her common patrimony with the Jews, and motivated by the gospel’s spiritual love and by no political considerations, she deplores the hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time and from any source. (Abbott 1966, 665-667)

However, the hermeneutic circle continues to rotate. The dispossession and oppression of the Palestinian People calls into question an interpretation of Scripture that confers on the State of Israel a God-given right to the land that supersedes the rights of indigenous people who have lived there for centuries.

Other applications of the hermeneutic circle might include war, capital punishment, the rights of Lesbian and Gay persons, and the ordination of women. However, to return to our gospel passage, the death and resurrection of Jesus forced his first followers to reread the Israelite Scriptures. In so doing, they discovered new depths of meaning.

### **Opening of Eyes**

The climax of Luke’s narrative is the disciples’ recognition of Jesus “in the breaking of the bread.” Luke tells us that while the three were at table, presumably in the home of one of the disciples, Jesus “took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight.” (24.30-31)

The four actions of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving are found in the other two instances where Jesus presides at a meal in Luke's Gospel – the multiplication of the loaves and fish (Luke 9.16) and the Last Supper (Luke 22.19). One is tempted to search for some unique gesture or tone of voice or blessing formula that caused the disciples to recognize Jesus as opposed to anyone else. However, this would be to read our own psychological concerns into the narrative and to neglect Luke's theological perspective.

Luke's use of the divine passive<sup>6[6]</sup> indicates that the failure to recognize Jesus the stranger (v. 16), the eventual recognition (vv. 31 & 35), and the subsequent vanishing (v. 31) were all caused by God. This same theology comes out in Luke's report of Peter's speech to Cornelius and his family: "This man [Jesus] God raised on the third day and granted that he be visible, not to all the people, but to us, the witnesses chosen by God in advance, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." (Acts 10.40-41)

To see the risen Jesus, then, was not an act of casual observation but a grace from God. At each Eucharistic celebration as we listen to the Scriptures and recall the words and actions of Jesus at the Last Supper we pray that the Spirit of Jesus will open our ears to the word of God and open our eyes so that Jesus will be made known to us again in the breaking of the bread.

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<sup>6[6]</sup> The divine passive was a way that ancient Israelites avoided using the name of God directly. They did this out of reverence for the divine Name and as a protection against even inadvertently violating the commandment against taking the name of God in vain. Thus, "He has been raised." (24.6) implies "by God." It can be rephrased: "God raised him."

In preparing these remarks I consulted the following works in addition to the biblical texts:

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Charlesworth 1985 – James H. Charlesworth, Ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 2: Expansions of the “Old Testament” and Legends, Wisdom and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms, and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works* (New York: Doubleday, 1985)

Conzelmann 1961 – Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, translated by Geoffrey Buswell (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961)

Eusebius 1965 – Eusebius of Caesarea [260?-339?], *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, translated with an introduction by G. A. Williamson (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965)

Fitzmyer 1985 - Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV : Introduction, Translation, and Notes*. Anchor Bible Volume 28A. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985)

Hennelly 1984 - Alfred T. Hennelly, “The Biblical Hermeneutics of Juan Luis Segundo” in Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, S.J., Eds., *Readings in Moral Theology No. 4* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984)

Johnson 1991 - Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series Volume 3, A Michael Glazier Book (Collegeville [MN]: Liturgical Press, 1991)

*Liber Usualis* 1952 – *The Liber Usualis with Introduction and Rubrics in English*, edited by the Benedictines of Solesmes (Tournai [Belgium]: Desclée & Co., 1952)

Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003 - Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Second Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003)

Metzger 1994 – Bruce M. Metzger, *A textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1994)

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