

Recently I viewed the film *Silence*. The major theme is the seeming loss of faith accompanied by the experience of an absence of the presence of God in the lives of two priests confronting the persecution of Japanese Catholics in the sixteenth century.

The situation of the two disciples on Easter night in today’s Gospel has parallels. The Jesus they knew, in whom they had invested their hopes, dreams, indeed their lives, was dead. Despite reports of the discovery of his empty tomb and his supposed rising from the dead, the testimony was not convincing. All they had left were their shattered dreams, feelings of abandonment, and the silence of God.

At times, we too, know the experience of the two disciples on the Emmaus road and the two priests in the movie. One of the recurring pastoral situations I encounter is the question “why” begging an explanation of where God is or why God is absent or silent as I walk with people through tragedies that shatter not only their life’s plan or dreams, but also the core of their faith. Divorce, the diagnosis of terminal or progressive debilitating illness in one’s life or in the life of a loved one, loss of a job, the experience of a natural disaster like a tornado, flood, or fire which completely obliterates the physical possessions of a lifetime—all cry out for some experience of the presence of God—to answer our questions, calm our fears, and offer us comfort and consolation.

The journey to Emmaus is a literal and a spiritual journey. It recounts the story of two disciples who, after the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord, walk seven miles from Jerusalem to their village of Emmaus. Simultaneously, it outlines the journey all of us take from not recognizing Jesus, to understanding what the Scripture say about Him, to recognizing Him for who he is, and finally to our giving witness to what we have experienced.

Although the disciples knew who Jesus was, they did not recognize him. It’s not that he wasn’t there with them. The problem was they don’t or couldn’t see him. And so for

them, as for us, Jesus needed to open their eyes, physically, but even more spiritually. He does this in two ways.

First of all, Jesus “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.” The Scriptures, when proclaimed during the celebration of the Sacraments, especially here at Mass, are more than an historical record. As the revealed Word of God they are a true real presence of God and of Jesus in the Gospels, through the Holy Spirit. St. Paul tells Timothy that “all Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (II Tm. 3:16,17). This is the truth to which Jesus opens the lives of the two disciples. We are told that at the word of Jesus “their hearts burned within them” and they, in turn, returned to Jerusalem and themselves shared the Word of God. In the first reading we hear St. Peter’s testimony to Jesus following his coming to Easter faith from his experience of abandonment, shame and silence in the face of his betrayal and of the liberating word of forgiveness and apostolic commission from the Risen Jesus. In our times of crisis Jesus walks with us and shares his word, in Scripture and his word become flesh in the support of good friends who give us room to vent, a shoulder to cry on, a pep talk, or reality check as needed.

Secondly, the disciples “eyes are opened” as Jesus breaks bread with them. The celebration of the Holy Eucharist and the act of the reception of Holy Communion is our Emmaus table encounter. Similarly, when we sit down with someone who is troubled perhaps over a meal, a cup of coffee, or simply staying with them offering the “bread” of our presence, it is a eucharistic moment of nourishment, holy communion, the bread of Jesus taken, blessed, broken and shared in goodness, reconciliation, and justice.

We all have our Emmaus walk, when faith is tested by the seeming absence and silence of God. It is then we need to remember to look and see Jesus journeying with us but in ways we did not expect. And we also need to remember that we may be sent to be the Word, the Bread, the Presence, the Sacrament of the Risen Jesus for someone else.

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