

Homily Third Sunday Easter
St.Margaret of Antioch Leigh-on-Sea

Acts of the Apostles 2:14.22-33

1Peter 1:17-21

Luke 24:13-35

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I have entitled this sermon “Lift up your hearts” and there is a postscript which you may care to read.

Lift up your hearts - We lift them to the Lord.

These are very familiar words from the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer.

The Church, when authentically true to its calling, is a Eucharistic community. It is a Eucharistic community in two senses. Firstly in the world, with a calling to be thankful - for that as you know is the meaning of “Eucharist”. This first sense involves both humility and action or response to God’s generosity – the theme of our Lenten sermons. The second sense is the more obviously religious one to remember the ultimate generosity of God himself in the life, passion death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in Holy Communion. Both senses are mandated and are not optional – they are two sides of the same coin. At the end of each mass, communion or eucharist we are sent out into the world to be Eucharistic – to love and serve the Lord in the world - for we have received everything.

Each day the Church celebrates this. The Church of England, our Church, is required to ring the bell call folk to prayer and at the heart of our cycle of worship is the requirement for Holy Communion to be celebrated each Sunday and every feast day – like yesterday when it was St.Mark’s Day. To see this as an optional extra, not really mattering as long as the first sense is fulfilled, is to miss the point. Thanksgiving except in the light of God’s generosity becomes self-serving and self-centred at least until our complacent illusions have been shattered, as has happened with this pandemic. Whilst deeply disturbing for us all it is at least an opportunity to amend our values and ways.

The current hurt arising from our church’s protocols is understandable as they affect our calling to be Eucharistic in these inseparable senses, and whilst pandemics are not unprecedented in our history – our response certainly is. Time and history will judge our political, social and religious leaders it is not my place to do so.

It is however, the last Sunday of the month and I would normally be looking forward to our last Sunday Supper Mass with our young folk and of course - pizza. You can still of

course order your pizza made with human hands but not communion made of the same but blessed by God. Maybe our hearts “burn within us” for what we have lost – please God it will be restored before long.

The bread at the heart of Luke’s account of appearing of the risen Jesus would no doubt have been some sort of pizza like flat bread that he took blessed broke and shared and in it they recognised him. However key to their recognition was their journey not just with the stranger on the road but their lives hitherto. Their seeking of God in scripture and action, of serving of God in neighbour, their following of Jesus – listening and responding to his words. And then that *absence* – it is vital to their recognition of him. They truly and deeply feel his absence and are not elated or relieved by second hand reports of his rising – they are “downcast”. Their hopes and dreams are shattered. The absence of Jesus is heartfelt – perhaps not dissimilar to mine and yours for us not being together here around this table.

St. Augustine famously divides the Eucharist into the 5 actions of Christ himself – taking bread, blessing, breaking, sharing and sending that “the work of the incarnation may go forth”. We of course are human we don’t neatly divide into stages and processes whatever some behavioural scientists would have us believe.

Let us consider just one - the breaking. We may think of hard soil like London clay as it is at the moment parched and hard and quite familiar to the backs of Leigh Gardeners. It may be a metaphor for the self-centred life and the hardened heart. We know for seeds to grow the soil must be loose and broken open to water and nutrition. So it is for us in our spiritual and inner life. Perhaps in communion it comes for us in confession, perhaps with the “invitation to communion” that we may be healed or “comfortable words”, perhaps hearing the great Eucharistic prayer that Christ has opened his arms for us on the cross. There is a point like the disciples walking from Emmaeus when we move from being “downcast” to being **uplifted**; when our hearts no longer burn with disappointment, anger, blame, petty dispute or emptiness but with grateful love. This cannot help but overflow – it becomes our food, our joy, our energy for that sending out. I often say that the shortest and hardest part of the mass to fulfil is “Go peace to love and serve – thanks be to God.”

They recognised him and he was gone – but they set out that instant and did not stop except to tell their story. They had recognised Jesus in the breaking of bread and they embraced Jesus in the world. They did not just experience an early Eucharist but entered into a ***Eucharistic life*** where the world and sacrament are two sides of the same coin. Jesus has made his home in both he calls us to do the same.

A postscript.

Henri Nouwen was a wonderful theologian, priest and pastor, who found God in places and with people unvalued by this world. He was a person of great intellect and deep simplicity which would rightly cherish at this time. He wrote an exquisitely short and profound meditation on the Gospel of today entitled "**burning hearts.**" In it he concludes:

"Jesus gave us the Eucharist to enable us to choose gratitude. Nobody can make the choice for us. It prompts us to cry out to God for mercy, to listen to the words of Jesus, to invite him into our home, to enter communion with him and proclaim good news to the World. It opens the possibility of letting go of resentments and choosing to be grateful. The voice that calls us foolish asks us to have a completely new look at our lives, a look not from below where we count loss and resentment but from above where God offers us his glory.

In the end Eucharist, thanksgiving, comes from above. If we choose to receive it, to let the stranger into our inner lives, everything, even the trivial, becomes new nothing is accidental or futile. The most insignificant event speaks of faith hope and love. Our whole life and world becomes Eucharistic where everything becomes a way of saying thank you to him who joins us on the road."

So let us not be downcast but lift up our hearts and let them burn with thanksgiving. Amen.