

The Third Sunday of Easter

“All the Things That Had Happened”: A Reflection on the Death and Funeral of Pope John Paul II

The stories of the appearances of Jesus after the resurrection to his disciples are some of the most engaging parts of the Gospels. Today’s incident gives a lot more detail than most of them since it is the longest account of disciples actually experiencing Jesus alive after the resurrection: the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus on Easter evening. Because it is more detailed there is more opportunity for us to step into the experience of these two disciples and see what connection it holds for us since we too have experienced Jesus risen and alive.

It begins with the disheartened disciples walking away from Jerusalem apparently heading back to the place of their lives before they met Jesus and followed him. As they walk they get into an animated and intense discussion about “all the things that had happened”. The Greek word used for used to describe their “conversation” is one that Scriptures scholars tell us was used for really intense conversations, even for arguments. In other words they were really into this conversation. It was not a conversation about the weather or something else to pass the time of their journey. It was a conversation in which they were deeply invested and about which they felt strongly. After all they had left everything to follow Jesus and hoped that he would be the one to set Israel free, the long-awaited Messiah. Now he was dead, but his tomb was empty and some women of their company said that they had seen angels who said Jesus was alive.

As they walk and talk they become aware of Jesus walking with them. He asks, “What’s up? What are you talking about with such great fervor?” Their response is one of the most comical in all of Scripture: “Are you the only one in Jerusalem who does not know all the things that happened there this week?” In fact, Jesus was the *only* person in Jerusalem who *really did know* what was going on there that week. But Jesus asks anyway, “What things?” and the disciples tell the story of those events from their perspective. Jesus then responds telling them what happened from his perspective and connecting it with what they knew as faithful Jews from the Scriptures. They don’t quite get it, but they are intrigued enough to invite him to stay for supper with them.

During supper something happens. Was it the way he held the bread, the look in his eye, the tone of his voice as he pronounced the words of blessing? The Gospel writers do not tell us, but something happened and they recognized him. Then he vanished from their sight.

At this point they seek to describe how they felt as they look back to their discussion with him on the road. They use a great image. It was as if their hearts were burning within them. What a vivid image! Have you ever had such an experience of feeling like your heart was burning within you? Then you know how they felt.

They have a choice then. They could stay there, thrilled about their experience of Jesus alive. They could build a shrine on the spot or carve something into the table to mark the spot. But they don't. The real experience of Jesus risen and alive is not something a person keeps for themselves because faith is never just a "me and Jesus" thing, never something for an exclusive group. They are impelled by the experience to return to the larger community and discover that they too had had similar experience. Drawn together by their experiences of Jesus they are a community of Christian faith.

Now using as a backdrop the Emmaus text let's look back on all the things that had happened this past week surrounding the death and funeral of Pope John Paul II. It was an historical phenomenon that begs for our reflection in faith. It was an exceptional experience by all accounts. They said that the population of Rome doubled last week. People flew from everywhere. Leaders of nations and religions came. People stood in line for twelve to fourteen hours to pass by the Pope as he lay in state in St. Peter's Basilica. People were reverent and respectful. There were no incidents reported. News commentators usually smooth and polished, were tripping over their words and even expressing a bit of their own religious faith on air. One report said that Pope John Paul's funeral was "the largest religious event in history". That's something! We have to pay attention to it and ask what it all means.

What was it about Pope John Paul II that occasioned such an event?

It occurred to me that at least half if not more of the people in Rome last week as well as those watching and listening throughout the world do not agree 100% with all that Pope John Paul taught. In fact, let's be honest. I suspect that a good number of us here do not agree with 100% of what he

taught either. And yet so many people here and there were attracted to him. People of our faith, or of another faith or of no religious faith. People of disparate perspectives and politics came together to honor this Pope. What was it about him that attracted them? I suggest that there were three things.

First of all, Pope John Paul was a man of substance. He was a poet, a philosopher, had a great sense of humor, was comfortable with young and old alike, loved to read, was engaged in the big picture of life in our world, loved nature, hiked and climbed mountains. He was a man of substance. And in a world/culture in which others of less substance are held up for our admiration and emulation the Pope was a refreshing change. I was watching TV this week and a run of little commercials came on. First it was a commercial for one of those tabloid shows like Entertainment Tonight about some self-absorbed starlet who was changing her hair-do or her husband. Then came an interview with someone in line waiting to get into St. Peter's Basilica talking about why she was there. Then came a commercial for The Apprentice adulating Donald Trump as some kind of "hero", someone who had really made it. Then came another advertisement about the funeral of the Pope and all the heads of state who were coming to it. The contrast said it all: People are attracted to people of substance especially after being fed a diet of less-than-substantial people. They want people of substance to look up to.

Secondly no matter how you may have disagreed with what Pope John Paul II taught it was clear that he lived his faith with integrity and passion. It ran like a thread through the fabric of his life and ministry. It was integrated into every aspect of his person. And he was passionate about it taking every available opportunity to evangelize about it. People admire that kind of integrity and passion and deeply desire to believe in something that sincerely themselves.

Thirdly Pope John Paul II was truly concerned about people especially those whose needs were greater than most: the poor, the oppressed, young people, the sick and disabled. He went out to them traveling throughout the world even when he was weakened himself by illness and age. He would look into people eyes, not over their shoulder at the next person in line. He connected with people. Ordinary people felt touched by him. That connection was powerful.

Now as our second reading today from the pastoral letter of St. Peter ends it reminds us that our faith and hope are in God, not Pope John Paul II. Although some would form a cult around him and his personality, John Paul would be the first to remind us that he is not what it's all about. It's about God. It's about Jesus raised from the dead. So what can we do with our reflection on this experience this week? I again suggest three things.

First of all we strive to become people of substance. Work to become more focused on the things that really matter. Don't sweat the small stuff or allow the small stuff to focus your life and its energies. Grow in body, mind and spirit. Live fully and deeply. Life is God's great gift and God is best experienced when we live life fully and deeply.

Secondly live your faith in God with integrity and passion. Let it touch all facets of your life, your values and your attention. And be passionate about what you believe. No one was ever attracted by a half-hearted faith. Let it invigorate yourself and others.

And lastly take a sincere interest in people. I have a friend who is fond of saying, "It's not where you are. It's who you're with." Develop a special interest for God's poorest ones, those who are ill, oppressed or needy in anyway more than you are. Take time and energy to pay attention to them. Don't just talk the talk; walk the walk!

May Pope John Paul II rest forever in God's peace! And may we grow in our awareness of Jesus risen and alive calling us too to greater faith and deeper holiness of life!