

St Mary's Concord

A Reflection for the Third Sunday of Easter

This is a reflection for the Third Sunday of Easter (Year A): Acts 2:14, 22-28; 1 Peter 1:17-21; Luke 24:13-35.

To contain the spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic all churches remain closed. If you have not already done so, please take a few minutes to read Luke's account of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35).

Like much of the world we continue to exercise social distancing if not complete isolation but for us this weekend has an added challenge. We will celebrate ANZAC Day without the public rituals that we have come to take for granted. There will be no dawn services, no ANZAC Day marches and no communal celebrations whether sacred or secular.

One of those public rituals, the Dawn Service, follows an established pattern of words and actions. Whether at ANZAC Cove or the Cenotaph in Martin Place or at any one of the hundreds of war memorials in towns around the country, the Dawn Service followed a traditional pattern of words and actions.

The first recorded official Dawn Service was held at Sydney's Cenotaph in 1928. It was a simple ceremony of remembrance for the veterans who had assembled before dawn to 'stand-to' and pause for two minutes of silence. It was based on an established military practice in which troops would be woken before dawn so that they were in position in case of an enemy attack.

Rituals provide us with a familiar way to participate in an event without having to stop and think about what we need to do next. They can also give us a way to link our present experience to past events. That certainly is true for ANZAC Day and while the Dawn Service is a secular celebration it is always celebrated within the Easter season.

For Christians Easter is not just one day. The Sundays of the Easter season allow us time to explore the meaning of the Resurrection of Jesus for us today. One important way we do that is by gathering each Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist. The fact that we cannot do so this year provides us with a different experience that hopefully leads us to appreciate the Mass that we often take for granted.

Whenever we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, we are in fact celebrating a sacred ritual. While the details have evolved and changed over the centuries, the essential pattern of the ritual has been handed down to us from the early Christian communities.

In the *Acts of the Apostles*, Luke gives an insight into the emerging ritual. In Acts 2:46-47 he tells us that the faithful in Jerusalem lived together and went to the Temple to pray but met in their houses for the breaking of bread. We know that "the breaking of the bread" was Luke's term for the memorial meal they shared to recall what Jesus had done at the Last Supper.

St Paul also leaves us an account of a communal meal celebrated by the Christian community in Corinth. That communal meal was clearly the way they celebrated the Lord's Supper but Paul condemns them for excluding the poor members of the community from the meal (1 Cor 11:17-34).

We know therefore that the early Christians used a ritual meal to recall the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus, a ritual obviously linked to what Jesus himself had done at the Last Supper.



It is also clear that those early communities included readings from the Jewish scriptures and the psalms in their gatherings. What we now call the 'Liturgy of the Word' was based on the Jewish sabbath day synagogue service.

The key elements were readings from the Torah (the Law of Moses) and from the Prophets. In his gospel Luke presents Jesus at the beginning of his mission going to the synagogue at Nazareth and reading from the prophet Isaiah (Lk 4:16-22).

It is against that background that we come to Luke's account of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. As they walked, they were trying to understand the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus joins them on the road and after listening to them, he draws on the Jewish scriptures, the Torah (Moses) and the prophets, to explain to them the meaning of what had happened in Jerusalem.

When they reach their destination, they urge him to stay with them and Luke tells us that they recognised Jesus in 'the breaking of the bread'. They later recalled "were not our hearts burning within us ...while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

For Luke's community the fundamental question was "How do we encounter the risen Lord?" They were living decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus and many of that first generation of witnesses were gone.

Their question is also our question: How do we encounter the risen Lord? Luke's answer is just as relevant today. You will meet him in the community that is gathered, in the Word of God that is proclaimed and in the "breaking of the bread" that is shared.

Expressed in our terms, whenever we celebrate the Eucharist the risen Christ is present in the community, in the Word of God and in the sacred meal that we share. In that sense the Mass is a sacred ritual made up of words and actions but it is more than a ritual, it is a sacrament.

What makes the difference? The gift of the Holy Spirit who transforms our human ritual into a moment of encounter with the Risen Lord.

Paul Crowley
26 April 2020