Easter 3A - Zephaniah 3: 14-end; Acts 2: 14a, 36-41; Luke 24: 13-35

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

After last week’s service, someone messaged me to say that it had been helpful to them to think of Thomas not as just a bit dense or pathetic but to think about the possibility that he might have been having a bit of a strop over Jesus turning out to be a different sort of leader from the one they had imagined and hoped-for.

And it is often really useful to read scripture in an imaginative way – that is partly why Lectio Divina can be such a good tool for getting into the Bible and hearing not only what was written hundreds and hundreds of years ago, but also what it might mean for us collectively today and what it might mean on a personal level for each one of us separately.

And I was reminded of the theologian who suggested that we should read the phrase Be still and know that I am God, not as a gentle exhortation to prayer but like a teacher going into a rowdy – probably teenage – classroom. That sort of authoritative: Be still. How often do we make Jesus a fluffy Disney version of himself – I’m thinking of the childhood hymn: Gentle Jesus, meek and mild. No. Just no. Jesus got really angry and pushed the tables over in the Temple, remember. Just because God is a loving God, that does not mean that Jesus was in any way a pushover.

Therefore, this story of the Emmaus road this morning needs to be interrogated quite firmly. So picture these two, and keep last week in mind: they are walking along the road away from Jerusalem in the afternoon or early evening on Easter Day and discussing the recent events ‘quite heatedly’, as some translations will say. Very likely, they were in a bit of a rush to get away from Jerusalem – there is that underlying sense of fear at how the events have unfolded – remember the disciples in the upper room with the door locked.

We always seem to assume that the two disciples were both men, but we have ample evidence that Jesus had a good many female disciples, so this could even have been a domestic row – a man and a woman – you were the one who said we should follow him, no you were.. and now look where that’s got us. What a disaster that was. Or whatever.

Either way, these are two people with cross and upset faces, who, when Jesus elbows his way into their argument, ask quite rudely: Are you the only one around who doesn’t know what has gone on? And they recount the whole story because, clearly, he is the idiot who has had his eyes and ears shut this entire weekend.

But when he can get a word in edgeways, he parries with: you are the fools – don’t you see that was what had to happen? And goes back to the very beginning of scripture to put the whole jigsaw puzzle together in a way they might grasp.

And then just as he makes to leave them, they urge him strongly – maybe blocking his way or grabbing him by the arm – to stay with them and carry on talking. Which he duly does.

Thinking back again to last week – if you remember, Thomas had to stew in his own juice for a while until Jesus came back and broke into his isolation. These two are now doing just the same.

But then look what makes the difference to them: Jesus took bread, blessed it and broke it. Then their eyes were opened. Here is that self-offering we talked about: last week it was Jesus offering his wounds to Thomas, and this week, it is that symbolic breaking of bread – the body of Christ – in which he revealed himself. And only then did the two recognise and acknowledge that their hearts had been burning all the while within them. We live life forwards, but only truly understand it backwards, as Kierkegaard said.

And by this point, Jesus has vanished from their sight. The Greek has a fabulous phrase for it: he unappearing became. He was still present; but differently. That thought will become important in a moment.

We are all present to each other in these difficult times; but differently. Most people are not receiving communion in the way you have been used to because you are obliged to watch the service on a screen. (Pray, though, if you will, for those who are not even able to do that – those who don’t have internet or a suitable screen might watch a televised service or even follow a paper order of service just in the knowledge that the service is going on at the same time).

It strikes me that this Emmaus road incident has much in common with our current situation. The Christians for whom Luke’s gospel was written had a similar worship pattern to ours: opening scripture and breaking bread was how they encountered Christ, and really not a lot has changed since. We too break open the scripture by reading, or hearing, and by some study or teaching – such as via a sermon – and then we break bread together.

In the Emmaus story, Jesus took bread, blessed it and broke it. That was the point at which the disciples recognised him; not when they all consumed the bread. One of the vestry prayers I use before services includes the line: make yourself known in the breaking of the bread. Our experience of Christ among us is not anchored to the eating of the bread – which I hope is a huge comfort to those of you who are not able physically to receive communion at this time.

You, with me, are witnesses to the opening of the scriptures, to the taking, the blessing and the breaking. And in those actions, Christ makes himself known to us. When we can receive only a Spiritual Communion, we can take heart in the fact that we are able – often because of the camera at much closer quarters than we normally do – to bear witness to, and participate in, a great deal of the Eucharistic action. Just not in the final eating. But we have to focus on the whole prayer and therefore on the whole act: that bit which most people cannot share at present is important. But it is not the be-all and end-all, because Christ is present to us in an infinite number of ways.

Christ is present in those parts of the service which we can share; Christ is present to us in many small acts of kindness from people around us; Christ is present to us in the ways we are finding to pray together.

We may be absent to each other in body, but we are present to each other in other way.

As Jesus ‘unappearing became’ to the disciples on the Emmaus road, so may we continue to be unappearing yet **with** one another – and with Christ - on a daily basis, as we do what is necessary in this pandemic together, and look forward to the day when we can be together in body once more.

**Amen**