

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER
(Acts 2.14a, 36-41; Luke 24.13-35)

One of the joys of television is that it gives us a chance to watch people doing things that intrigue us, without our having to do them for ourselves. A few years ago, for example, I watched a programme about fire walking, in which a group of men and women volunteered to walk bare foot along a path of burning embers. Before walking on the embers they received training that would ensure – they were promised – that the soles of their feet would not be damaged by the flames.

It was fascinating! Their trainer was a charismatic young man who persuaded them that if they believed firmly enough that they would not be burned, their faith would protect them. As part of their training, they were shown films of other groups apparently succeeding in this mind-over-matter feat.

By and large the group were successful: only one or two suffered a small burn to a foot. Initially, it looked as if trust in their invulnerability *had* protected them from the flames. But then it emerged that one of the group was a scientist who had no confidence in the mind-over-matter approach at all. He said, “Well, I thought if they could do it then anyone could do it. It has got nothing to do with faith.” When questioned about this, the leader of the group who had given the training was sceptical, claiming that the scientist *had* been protected by faith – his faith that anyone could do it.

Viewers were left to form their own opinion, but the programme left me wondering about the nature of faith itself – not least religious faith. *Is* faith, our faith, the Christian faith, about trying to believe certain things so absolutely and firmly that they become real in our lives – to the point where, could we but believe strongly enough, we would walk through fire and not be burned?

I have heard some presentations of the Christian faith that point in this direction. But before we leap to embrace them it may be helpful to remember – as this morning’s Gospel reading reminded us – that the single greatest miracle in Christian history occurred, not in the presence of faith, but in a place of total dereliction.

As those two disciples plodded disconsolately towards Emmaus and found themselves overtaken by a stranger, they were not telling themselves that if only they could keep believing strongly enough, Jesus would rise from the dead. Instead, as Jesus’ first questions revealed, their faith had died: “We *had* hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” So great was their loss of faith that even news of the empty tomb had failed to alert them.

This is so poignant, and so true to life. When atheists are asked why they do not believe in God, one of the most frequently given answers is that they cannot reconcile the amount of suffering in the world with the existence of a loving God. Very many nonbelievers did, once, believe in God – but then a tragedy occurred in their lives, perhaps the death of someone they loved, or the birth of a child with chronic difficulties, and their trust in God began to wane. Whether they then

took leave from God with sadness or relief the reason was always the same: the story they used to tell about God, the things they had once believed about God, were no longer adequate to illuminate their painfully enlarged experience of the costliness of life. Like the disciples, they might have said, "We *had* hoped that he was the one" who would save us. But he didn't, so now we don't believe in him.

It is interesting to note Jesus' reaction to his disciples' loss of faith. He didn't jump up and down in front of them saying, "Yoo-hoo! Wake up, look at me! I'm not dead. I'm alive!" Instead, he seems to have taken their loss of faith very seriously indeed because, according to St Luke, he offered them another way of thinking about the events that had occurred, saying,

"Was it not necessary the Messiah should have suffered these things and then entered into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures (24.26f).

From a psychological point of view, loss of faith in God is always linked to outgrowing an inadequate picture of God. We all carry within us an internal image of God, even if we are atheists. Dr Richard Dawkins has made a fortune, writing book after book proving that his own internal image of God does not exist. The trouble is, it does exist: in his own mind. So his books will have to continue, at least until he can find more adequate ways of thinking about God that will encompass his scientific understanding.

From what St Luke writes, it seems that the disciples had had a picture of the Messiah, and what the Messiah would achieve, that did not involve suffering and death. But suffering and death are unavoidable in this world: even God in Christ was not immune from them. It is not suffering and death that matter in themselves, but how we respond to them. Sometimes, instead of suffering leading to a loss of faith, it can become the stimulus – like the grit in the oyster – that forces our minds open to deeper truths about God. I remember Sister Frances Dominica – the nun who founded Douglas and Helen Houses, in Oxford, where children and young people with life shortening and terminal conditions are cared for – saying, when she preached here, "As I grow older, I believe in fewer things; but I believe in them more firmly."

By the time the disciples reached Emmaus, their hearts were burning within them; but still they did not know that Jesus was alive. It was only when he took the bread, and blessed and broke it that their new understanding of God's ways enabled the connection: Jesus was alive! Tantalisingly, in that moment of connection, he disappeared. But now they knew that they would not have to rely on his physical presence: they could find him in the breaking of the bread.

Sometimes we do need to affirm our faith as strongly as we can. But there are other times when the sheer cost of life overwhelms our understanding and leaves us bereft of faith – as those disciples were. Then we may need the help of an interpreter who can help us think about our situation in a wider and deeper way. This will not give us faith, but it may prepare the ground for that unimagined moment of recognition when we rediscover – despite everything –

that Jesus *is* alive. This is resurrection: a foretaste of God's kingdom. Our faith may not protect us from the burning embers on life's path, but it can give us something more precious still: the confidence that even the most appalling suffering and death will, somehow, be transfigured – as Jesus' hideous wounds were within his resurrection body. In this world we live in the shadow of the cross, but even that terrible instrument of torture sometimes glows in the light of Easter morning.