

Jesus Reveals Himself

Acts 9:1-6, John 21:1-19

Both of our readings are about post-resurrection appearances of Jesus.

After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:3)

The resurrection of Jesus defies adequate description. It was completely different to Lazarus' resurrection from the dead. Lazarus did not need to offer "convincing proofs" of his resurrection. It was accepted as a simple, though remarkable, truth and resulted in crowds following Jesus. But the resurrected Jesus was clearly something completely new and outside any category that could be offered. Jesus had to persuade even His closest disciples that He was really physically alive and not an apparition like a ghost. Even so, Matthew tells us, some doubted:

"When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted." Matt 28:17

There seem to have been two principle problems: firstly that He was no longer immediately recognisable. Even those closest to Him were unable to recognise Him immediately. Mary thought He was a gardener and in our Gospel reading, Peter failed to recognise Him. Likewise the disciples on the road to Emmaus spent all day with Jesus teaching them and yet failed to realise it was Jesus. We are not told why He was not immediately recognisable; it is simply presented as a fact.

The second obvious problem understanding the nature of Jesus' resurrection was that He no longer had an address. Previously, anyone who wanted to could go and find Jesus. He didn't just appear and disappear, and He didn't walk through locked doors.

But the resurrection Jesus appeared and disappeared just like a ghost. But He clearly wasn't a ghost, and took pains to make sure His disciples knew He wasn't a ghost. When He was visibly with them he was entirely physical and ate meals with them, as the accounts are at pains to point out.

Jesus appeared many times over a period of 40 days, but then He didn't just stop appearing, He visibly rose into heaven as a physical person. The meaning is clear, and forms part of the essential Christian faith. Through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Trinity now includes a man, the Man Jesus. This too is a mystery we cannot adequately describe or comprehend, but it is the foundation of our hope and confidence in God's grace to understand us in our weak humanity.

It is astonishing and sobering and perhaps comforting to know that amongst the disciples who walked with Jesus before His death and who met Him after His resurrection, there were some who doubted.

Doubt is not a virtue, not something we should sit comfortably with, but it is part of our humanity. It is natural and understandable. But perhaps those two qualities are the problem! - Being natural and understandable. Jesus is neither natural nor understandable. Faith takes us beyond the natural and the understandable.

Our readings show us sincere and deeply religious people acting in natural and understandable ways. Paul was sincerely convinced that Jesus and the new movement of His disciples were an evil deception that, as a God fearing man, he had a duty to suppress.

The disciples were confused and leaderless after the crucifixion and needed time to think. When we find ourselves in difficult and confusing situations, we often take comfort in doing something we feel at home in. For the Galilean disciples, that meant fishing; the way of life they had known since childhood.

Jesus had risen from the tomb and appeared to them. He had talked again about the Kingdom, but then disappeared again. He seemed to be leaving it all up to them, which was quite ridiculous. How could they be expected to do what Jesus Himself had failed to do? God was asking and expecting far too much of them. The disciples were looking to Peter to lead them, but Peter was consumed with self-condemnation over his denial and abandonment of Jesus at His trial. It was a hopeless mess.

Jesus met the disciples on the beach and recommissioned them. There are echoes of the feeding of the thousands here. Jesus telling his disciples to feed the people and providing for them bread and fish. But this time the disciples caught the fish themselves, yet Jesus was still involved in the miracle. Jesus was saying, "I've shown you how to do it, now it's your turn. I will help you, but you must do it."

Living as disciples takes us beyond the natural and beyond our understanding and this can only happen through Jesus revealing Himself to us.

Jesus revealed Himself to Paul in a blinding light and thunderous voice - not a particularly common experience. He revealed Himself to the Apostles in our gospel reading through a miracle followed by a meal. There are a wide range of ways in which Jesus reveals Himself to us from the blindingly clear to the gradual awareness of His presence. Jesus still reveals Himself to people in a wide range of ways.

A missionary friend was telling us how they went into a remote village in Ecuador and showed them a film about Jesus. To their astonishment they found that the villagers immediately recognised Jesus in the film and were eager to learn all about Him. They told our friend that the man they had seen in the film had visited the village recently, told them his name was Jesus, shared the good news of the kingdom and told them that some white people would come and tell them more about Him.

A friend was talking to someone in a supermarket about Jesus recently and then joined the checkout queue. The person behind her said, "Excuse me, I heard you talking about Jesus. Can you tell me about him? I'm a Muslim and Jesus has been coming to me in my dreams recently and I want to get to know him."

Mirrlees' cousin Nicolas was until a few years ago an atheist GP. The Holy Spirit began to trouble him and challenge his atheist faith. We started having long conversations as he explored the Christian faith, but he could never come to the point of believing and trusting Jesus. Then one day he was sitting in someone's garden when suddenly there was a great gust of wind. In a moment he was filled with faith and I later had the privilege of baptising him during a mission trip to South Africa. Since that day he has been a transformed man zealous for God's kingdom.

Everyone's story of how Jesus revealed Himself to them is different and personal, yet one factor is common to all who know Jesus. It is He who makes Himself known to us; we cannot find Him on our own. Jesus said,

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them." (Jn 6:44)

But there is a common factor in many of Jesus' appearances after the resurrection, and that is sharing in a meal. Again and again in the resurrection

appearances we are told of Jesus eating with His disciples. Sharing meals was an important aspect of His self-revelation which is continued in the celebration of Holy Communion but also in Christian hospitality which is an important aspect of discipleship.

Eating together is a vital aspect of fellowship, discipling and evangelism. Much of Jesus' ministry took place over meals and Jesus and the apostles taught explicitly about hospitality:

"...For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me..." (Matt 25:35)

"...when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you." (Lk 14:14)

"Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach..." (1Tim 3:2)

"Show hospitality to one another" (1Pet 4:9)

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers..." (Heb 13:2)

The most basic application of hospitality is simply families eating their regular meals together. With the advent of television and computer games and long working hours or shift work, fewer and fewer families share regular meals together. Whatever the reason for families not eating together, there are countless studies that you can easily find on the internet that demonstrate that families that eat together are happier and have fewer problems than those who don't.

Although there is little explicit teaching in the bible about families eating together, it was the norm in Jewish families and in the church. Families eating their daily meals together is a vital aspect of sharing the faith from one generation to the next, and indeed a child's simple faith and natural curiosity can encourage and provoke the faith of their parents.

When Jesus shared the last supper with His disciples He added a new dimension to the family meal; a dimension that was highly valued in the early church, but has I fear been largely lost in the institutionalising of this meal in the Eucharist. Jesus said to remember Him whenever we eat together, a command we see being immediately acted out in Acts 2:

“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts”
(Acts 2:46)

Jesus never intended that the Last Supper should only be celebrated by a priest in a church worship service. It was meant to be, and initially was, a regular family celebration over the family meal. Friends and neighbours and visitors would naturally be present and as well as enjoying the joyful company over a good meal they would hear about Jesus’ death and resurrection and the anticipation of His coming again in Glory. What a wonderful and natural witness to a family’s faith. It is not surprising that the church grew so rapidly.

Even if we do not celebrate the Last Supper over our regular meals, they are times of natural fellowship where our values and faith are made evident in the course of our interactions and conversation. The risen Jesus revealed Himself time and again through sharing meals and He continues to do so today.

So firstly I want to encourage you to make a priority of sharing meals together in your home without the distractions of TV or radio.

And secondly I want to encourage you to be hospitable in whatever ways you are able, both to those within the church family but especially towards newcomers and unbelievers. You may not feel able to share your faith using words but perhaps you can let Jesus reveal Himself in the context of a shared meal – whether that be a coffee and cake at Tea on the Green or lunch or tea or a dinner party at home.

Perhaps you might dare to say a simple grace, or even offer to say a simple prayer for your friend. To do so communicates a great deal about your faith without you having to even talk to your friend directly about your faith. When you pray you are demonstrating to your friend that you have a real personal relationship with Jesus; that you believe Jesus is alive and real and present with you. It demonstrates you expect Jesus to hear you and answer you. It shows that you can address God without fear and without complicated rituals. It demonstrates that you are at peace with God and know that He loves and forgives you.

A shared meal and a simple prayer – these are hardly scary. They might not lead to anything else, but you never know! Jesus has a habit of revealing Himself through shared meals.

