

The Stranger We Knew

“Are you a stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” For some reason this question does not seem like a pleasant question. Not that the two disciples were upset or angry with the stranger, but they found it extremely strange that a resident of Jerusalem or its environs did not know what has been going on in Jerusalem. The impression the question creates for me is, the events under discussion were notable events which also had some good press.

And with that being the case, how come this stranger is totally ignorant of these events? Well, either this gentleman may indeed be a stranger in the area that is why he found their conversation sullen enough to inject himself into it or he was just plain stupid. But the story sounds more like a USC or Clemson alumnus who lives in the Vista, goes out in the evening on the third Saturday in November, sees a happy bunch of USC students talking about the game between USC and Clemson and asks what is going on?

Either this alumnus is totally detached from the life of the Alma Mater, does not share the passion of football or he/she is just weird or psycho. But then even in spite of their surprise, the disciples offer to share with the stranger the life and ministry of Jesus, the crucifixion and the story of the empty tomb.

But in briefing the stranger, they miss an important part of the Jesus story. Cleopas and his friend tell the stranger that their initial hope was the redemption of Israel by Jesus. But here we are, he could not redeem Israel, Israel's hope of redemption was crucified, dead and been buried. And to make the situation worse, the body is no longer in the tomb. There have been reported visions of him but frankly, we really do not know what had happen to him. What I hear Cleopas and his friend telling the stranger is, for what ever reason, this is our new reality, and this is what happened to our hope.

Oftentimes, when all hope is gone, when nothing seems to be working right, when the seven mile distance between Jerusalem and Emmaus seem like a thousand mile journey, when life's uncertainties, pain and disappointment takes its toll on us and drives us in a different trajectory, we tend to create strangers. We become strangers to our own selves, we become strangers to our families, friends and neighbors, we become strangers in our own homes and in our offices and workplaces. And because we have become strangers to ourselves and anything round about us, we cannot even tell when we see a familiar face or hear a familiar voice.

In as much as the two disciples were willing to share stories of the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we must note that like most disciples, Cleopas and his friend had simply given up. If the person for whom they were in Jerusalem is dead, what was the point in their continual stay in Jerusalem? However, the interesting part of today's gospel is, the person who was deemed to be the stranger and who probably knew nothing about Jesus, becomes the very same person who questions their lack of faith and understanding and then interprets the deeper meaning and wider significance of a hope that the disciples thought was completely gone. Based on their interaction with the stranger, they invite the stranger to share a meal with them and in the course of sharing the meal; they realize that the stranger was the familiar face and voice they knew.

At this point, even if they were dismissive of earlier reports about visions and sighting of the risen Christ, not only have they now seen him for themselves, but they can with courage, conviction and excitement return back to Jerusalem and reclaim their lost hope by sharing their story of a new beginning and a new understanding of scripture with the other disciples.

But more than that, the excitement of the group points to the vindication of their Rabbi. For if after suffering a brutal and sadistic death, the Rabbi is alive, then indeed good triumphs over evil. If the chief priest and elders who conspired against him, indicted him and eventually had him killed, hoping that his death will diminish all the hoopla and blah blah blah about the coming kingdom of God. The reality of a risen Christ not only vindicates Jesus but it points to the collective ignorance of those who conspired to have him killed and even those who decided to walk to Emmaus because of a lost cause.

Sometimes, ignorance of ourselves and ignorance of the depth of our relationship with God does not only make us strangers to ourselves but it also creates strangers for us. Many years ago, Jacob's unequalled

affection for his son Joseph created envy among his brothers who later conspired and sold him into slavery, thinking, that they were taking care of a potential problem. It is in that same vein did the chief priest and elders conspired to have Jesus killed, thinking, that they were taking care of a potential problem.

But they did not know that the Messiah had to die. The chief priest and the elders did not understand that the symbolisms that undergirds some of the metaphorical language that Jesus used, when for example he said that “Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat fall into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit” John 12:24. In other words, productivity is dependent on the dying of the grain of wheat. They did not know that the only way the mortal Messiah must achieve immortality was through death, and so in their attempt to take care of a perceived stranger who called into question their relationship with God, they actually facilitated the inauguration of the new providential purpose.

If Jesus had not been raised from the dead, his crucifixion would have been one of many, and he obviously would have been forgotten by his disciples. But the resurrection is the single most important reality that assured the disciples of his ever abiding presence, and also assures us of his presence in the past, his presence in the present and his continual presence in the future. It is the knowledge and assurance of his presence that makes it possible for me and you to sit in the same pew with a stranger, pray the same prayer with a stranger, sing the same hymn with a stranger, and share in the broken bread with the stranger we have always known because not only do we share the same hope but we also share the same heritage.

Amen.