

### *The Gift of the Sunday Parish Mass*

There is an evocative word St Peter uses in the reading from his 1<sup>st</sup> Letter. In verse 17 he encourages us “to live in reverent fear during the time of our exile”. This means we are to live alert to God in a land where God is absent from the lives of many people. We are not at home here. For those of you familiar with the prayer: “Hail, Holy Queen”, you will remember that it includes these words:

***“That after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb Jesus.”***

So what does it mean to be living in exile? This is where the word Peter uses for “exile” is so informative and helps to answer this question. The word in Greek for exile is: “Paroikos” “Oikos” is the Greek word for “house” and “par” means “beside”. Therefore Paroikos literally means to “live beside a house”. So if you live or dwell beside a home, it means you don't have a home yourself. What's fascinating about this word is that we get the word “parish” from this word “paroikos”. One commentator, Daniel Keating points out:

***Our English word “parish” derives from paroikos. The local church—our parish—is meant to be the gathering of Christian “sojourners” and “aliens” who are far from their true home. And what is our true home? It is where God dwells<sup>1</sup>***

Now with this understanding of the word ‘exile’ in mind, what is at the centre of Parish Life? It is the Sunday Mass. Everything else we do as exiles flows from our celebration of the Sunday Mass. This is the theme at play in today’s reading from the Gospel.

So here is the reason why the Sunday Mass is so important. It is the Day of the Resurrection and Jesus celebrated the first Sunday Mass on Easter Sunday, with just two people, a man named Cleopas and his unnamed partner.

Notice that these two are distancing themselves from Jerusalem. Emmaus, is some 11 kilometres away. Why is this detail important? Well it is because the first parish community was back in Jerusalem and these two are separating themselves from that community, walking away from it. Can't the same thing happen to us? We arrive at Sunday and while we might not literally drive away to separate ourselves from the Parish Community, it can be so easy for us to stay distant from God and God’s people by just staying away.

We are then told that they have an encounter with Jesus but they are kept from recognizing him – because they are sad. Why are they sad? Well it seems that the pressing influence of the world has demoralized them. They had thought Jesus would be the one who would make sense of the news, make sense of their world, but it seems that it is not so. This is second important lesson we learn from this passage. Because of our exile, at times the way the world presses in on us can be overwhelming and are eyes and hearts are kept from recognizing Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Keating, Daniel. First and Second Peter, Jude. Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture. 2 Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011

We know that the man Cleopas was related to Jesus. There is some documentary evidence outside of the New Testament suggesting he was St Joseph's brother which would make him the uncle of Jesus. But so overwhelmed is he by his exile, that he can't recognize that the one standing before him is Jesus.

Notice what happens next. Jesus enquires as to the topic of conversation they were sharing one with another. What were you talking about? What is on your mind? Cleopas answers:

***“Are you the only person in the vicinity of Jerusalem who is unaware of what has happened in these days”?***

This is a question filled with irony, because of course Jesus is the one person who knows more than anyone else what had transpired over these days. Here is the third lesson from this passage. We can feel at times Jesus doesn't understand my circumstances, the challenges I am facing in the world. That he is so distant from my struggles and sufferings.

Jesus then asks another probing question: “what things”? And then the two replied how they thought Jesus would be the one who would end their exile. That he would restore the kingdom to the Jewish people and it would be well, like heaven come to earth. And then they say that even some of the women parishioners from the Jerusalem community had been to the tomb and the body of Jesus was not there and angels had declared he was alive..... But they didn't see him so we don't know.

Now take to heart what Jesus says next:

***Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!  
<sup>26</sup> Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?”<sup>2</sup>***

Notice where Jesus goes next. In order to understand their exile and the struggle they have just experienced in witnessing Jesus' death, they have to understand the scriptures. The Bible is to the Parish Church the Book of the Exiles. It helps us to understand our lives and orientate them as we live here below. And always it points us to Jesus. And here then is the fourth point from our reading. How slow we can be to believe all the Bible teaches. But when we do, and this is the fifth point: as Jesus opens the Scriptures to us, there is a transformation that happens in our lives.

***Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures<sup>3</sup>***

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<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#) (Lk 24:25–26). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

<sup>3</sup> [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#) (Lk 24:27). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

The Bible comes to life and begins to make sense to us. Without the Bible we will lose ourselves in this land of Exile. But with Jesus interpreting the Scriptures to us then like these two we will say, were not our hearts burning within us as he opened the Scriptures to us.

Now we are getting to the heart of our story. At every Parish Mass we are like the two on the way to Emmaus. We hear the Bible read, and explained. This is the meaning of the word “homily”, “interpretation”. And what happens next? We move from what is called the Liturgy of the Word to the Eucharist. St Luke tells us that the two then invite Jesus into their home. This is a key move. To have a deepening love for the Parish Community and the Sunday Eucharist involves inviting Jesus home with us. Being attentive to him throughout the week. Listen to what St Luke say next:

***So he went in to stay with them. <sup>30</sup> When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.***

Notice what happens here. Jesus took the bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. Notice who this parallels what the priest says at the Mass:

***“Jesus took bread and giving thanks (the blessing) broke it and gave it to his disciples”***

Then we are told:

***<sup>31</sup> Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.<sup>4</sup>***

Why did he vanish from their sight at the very moment they recognized him. Because Jesus wanted to teach them, and us that he is now present in his Word and in His Eucharist. This is where he wants to meet us every Sunday. He wants to be made known to us in the breaking of the Bread.

Finally what happens at the end of the passage?

***That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.<sup>5</sup>***

Having been separated from the parish community in Jerusalem they now return renewed and committed to living purposeful and enthused lives because they had encountered Jesus in the first Sunday Mass ever celebrated.

May we be inspired to live with reverent fear during this time of our exile and discover ever more the beauty of the Sunday Parish Mass among the paroikos – the exiles, here at St Peter’s.

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<sup>4</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition\*](#) (Lk 24:29–31). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

<sup>5</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition\*](#) (Lk 24:33). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.