

Tuesday

WHEN WE BREAK BREAD TOGETHER: STEPHAN DE BEER

The world is in grief. For the 1,912,378 people infected with Covid-19; for the 118,683 who already died (by 13 April 2020); for the loss of jobs and income; the isolation from loved ones; the rude disruption of life as we knew it. Any radio or television channel you switch to, spend a considerable amount of time, speaking of these events.

There was grief too, as the two men walked on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24. They were saddened because the One they loved was crucified and died. With him their hopes vanished, and now, his body also disappeared. What a strange, horrid time.

As they contemplated these things, a stranger started to accompany them. He asked why they were sad? And listened intently. He did not reveal his true identity, perhaps so they could open up to him; perhaps so he could sense the mood of the people left behind.

This stranger happened to be the One they spoke of; the crucified and risen Christ. But, says the text in verse 16: "Their eyes were restrained so they did not know him".

In the midst of our deepest crises it is often as if our eyes are restrained. So overwhelmed by grief and agony we are; so caught up in the trauma of our loss, that we lose the ability to see. Our visions get blurry, our perspectives get muddied, and, if we are not alert, we might become victims, not of a virus, but of our own anxious thoughts, and slow surrender to hopelessness.

Jesus walked with them. Not in a victorious manner, like one who just defeated death. Not in a 'know-it-all' manner that could distance him from his companions. Jesus walked with them in a deeply listening manner. Curious. Intent to hear. Until he discerned their hearts.

In a time of deep agony, like this time, we are invited to be companions – of each other and of strangers given to us. It is a slow time because we are locked in. We do not have all the usual options of where we could go. And those of you who chose to be in temporary shelters are with women and men who usually have limited options of where they could go. In this slow time, we can learn afresh what it means to be companions on the road. In accompanying others, may you find the grace to attend tenderly to grief and anxiety, to hopelessness and a loss of vision.

May you find the grace to deal with your own grief and fears; may your capacity to live with hope and vision be rekindled and expanded.

At some point on the journey the Stranger called them out. They still did not recognize who he was, and now he called them "foolish ones", as he started to explain the Christ-story to them. They do not seem to have taken offense, because when they arrived at Emmaus he indicated that he was going further, but they said, "no, stay with us, because it is already late". Maybe the Stranger accompanying these two sad and anxious men, did it so respectfully that he earned the right to call them out. Because now they wanted him to stay with them.

In the next weeks we cannot foretell what will happen in our cities and towns. Will the lockdown be terminated so we can return to our homes? And what then will happen to those without a home to return to? Might they then say, "stay with us, because it is late", and we have nowhere else to go?

They then entered the house, and this time around, the Stranger became the host. It was not his house, but he took the bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to them. In that moment, as they broke bread together, their eyes were opened and they knew Him. Jesus appears among us as we break bread together. Jesus surprises us with his grace and mercy, when we open our hearts and

homes to strangers. Jesus disarms us from all our defences, when we allow the stranger to become the host. It is not for us to control the spaces now entrusted to us, but to be in those spaces as companions, with open hands, so that we too can break bread, and bread be broken for us. Our own healing is often intertwined with the frail offerings of the other.

Our own liberation caught up in the liberating moments of those forever kept down. And then Jesus vanished. Almost like the clown, stumbling in and out of the arena momentarily. We have a good laugh and then s/he is off again, leaving us to ourselves. But Jesus does not really vanish. Because now their hearts are burning within them. It started with the encounter on the road already. True companionship consists not only of sharing bread in a physical sense, but in how we make space for others to be safe and dignified.

Their hearts were warmed because he embraced them in their anxiety and affirmed them with so much humanity, and called them out with tender love, and stayed with them when they felt alone. His companionship became transformative. His warmth remained with them.

The next day they rushed to Jerusalem to tell the disciples what they saw. And now their sadness seems to have made way for boldness; their fear for courage, because they encountered the Risen One. As the cross of the world is a heavy burden to bear at this time, may the hope of the resurrection urge us to stay put, courageously working, convinced that the stone will be rolled away.

May we learn to be companions on the journey – accompanied by the Risen Stranger, as we accompany each other. The word, companion, literally comes from the Latin which means com (with) and panis (bread). Companions are people coming close enough to break bread, to share lives, to carry crosses, to roll away stones – whilst at surprising moments the Risen Stranger joins us, and we can say: have not our hearts been warmed within us, when we broke bread together.

Prayer

In our anguish and grief, may your mercy find us;

In our loneliness and despair, may your companionship enfold us;

When we break bread together, may your presence become clear to us;

When death seems to reign, Risen Stranger, help us know that life is stronger than death!

Amen