Homily – 3rd Sunday of Easter (B)

*Acts 3: 13-15, 17-19; 1 Jn. 2: 1-5 & Lk. 24: 35-48*

I may have used this image before – and apologies if I have – but one of my favourite toys when I was very little was a kaleidoscope. I’m sure you remember that a kaleidoscope is basically a cardboard tube with some mirrors inside, and some little pieces of coloured glass or plastic. Each time you rotate the tube, the little coloured shapes move around, and the mirrors make them look rather like a snowflake – each shape unique but symmetrical, every turn a slightly different pattern, but always made up of the same elements. You may be thinking by now that I was a seriously deprived child if such a simple thing could be – for me – so endlessly fascinating, but life was simpler back then!

The kaleidoscope came back into my mind as I was pondering today’s readings. At Mass for the last two Sundays, and during the days of the Easter Octave, we have been reading all the gospel stories of Jesus’ appearances after the Resurrection – Thomas in the Upper Room last week, Mary Magdalen’s encounter in the garden on Easter Sunday, the Eleven meeting Jesus at the lakeside in Galilee, the disciples on the Emmaus Road, which is the story which immediately precedes today’s gospel from Luke. You may be wondering a little what the connection is – but I think each of those stories is a little like the image in the kaleidoscope. Each story has its own unique pattern. Each story is viewed from a different angle, as if the tube had been twisted a half turn. Each story has its own beauty and fascination.

And perhaps above all, each of those stories is made up of more or less the same elements, just like the unchanging but mobile pieces of coloured glass. And those elements are, I think, quite interesting. There is the theme of “lack of recognition”. There is the theme of incredulity. In many of the stories, there is food involved – the supper at Emmaus, the breakfast by the lakeside. Then there is the theme of gradual understanding of who this man who stands before them really is. And in some cases, as with Mary and Thomas, there is a shout of joy when the penny finally drops – like Thomas’ cry “My Lord and my God” in last Sunday’s gospel.

So why am I going on about all this? Well, I have two reasons, I think. In the first place, and perhaps obviously, I think these little “kaleidoscope stories” are a cause for us to have hope. After all, they make it abundantly clear that even Jesus’ closest friends didn’t understand the Resurrection straightaway – even they found it a mystery which it took time to accept fully. And if that was true of Mary and the Eleven, it is probably true for us too. After all, in a sense, Christmas is an “easy” feast to understand; we know about mums and dads and babies – even if that does not quite cover the Incarnation and the Nativity. In the same way, perhaps, Good Friday makes sense to us – at least until we consider who it is who is dying on the Cross – since we have more than enough exposure to the cruelty of mankind and the horror of human brutality, be it exercised for religious or political motives. As human beings, we know about birth and death, we know about living and dying. But we have no direct experience of resurrection, no direct experience of the new life we have been promised by and with the Risen Lord – and so it takes time for us to come to terms with it, it takes time for us to ponder on this mystery year by year. And these little stories – at least in part – tell us that that is OK.

But there is a second reason why I cherish these “kaleidoscope stories”, and that is because – amongst all the themes I listed earlier – there is one very obvious theme missing, and that is the theme of retribution. The Risen Lord does not appear to his friends demanding an explanation of their cowardice in abandoning him. He does not greet them with bitter words of condemnation for their behaviour. Even “doubting Thomas” is not rebuked, but gently, and literally, “led by the hand” to faith. The Risen Jesus does not look backwards, but only forwards. His first words to his friends are “Peace be with you”. His first action, at least in today’s story, is to share food with them. His gift is to open their minds to understand the scriptures, his command is that they, and we, should be witnesses to all this, proclaiming this truth to the whole world, beginning from Jerusalem. The Risen Jesus does not look backwards, but only forwards – and that gives me hope.

In a few moments time, we will pray one of the Easter Prefaces to the Eucharistic Prayer. Every one of those prefaces ends in the same way, with a set of words prayed every day of Eastertide: *Therefore, overcome with Paschal joy, every land, every people exults in your praise*... I have often been a little troubled by that word “overcome” – it can sound just too definite, as if we were “knocked out” by paschal joy, or as if it were a tidal wave which swept us away. Perhaps for some people that is their experience – and if so, they are very blessed – it has certainly not been mine. Just this Easter, though, I have come to understand it a little better, I think. For it seems to me now that there is more than one way of being “overcome” by paschal joy. And I suspect that – rather than the tidal wave – it is more like the light of dawn, perhaps even the dawn of Easter day, that frail light which, little by little, overcomes the darkness until full day shines in all its brightness. Let us pray in this Mass, therefore, for a share in that Easter light, so that day by day in this great season we may be filled a little more with that paschal joy we pray for. Amen.

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14.4.18