

Christ, Present but Unrecognized

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Easter 3, April 29, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Acts 2:14a, 36-47; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35.

Bbzz

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. Some of you may remember the words of the Soviet Cosmonaut, Yuri Gargarin, when he returned from the first orbital flight back in the early 60s. He said something like, "I've look all over the heavens but I didn't see God anywhere." I remember how preachers pounced upon that quotation to underline the godlessness of communism. Many people, like Gargarin, can walk through this world without ever seeing signs of God. Many people don't recognize the presence of Christ in the world simply because they don't want to, or because their materialistic world-view and values just won't let them.

2. Then there are others, often Christians, who don't recognize the presence of Christ in the world because they've relegated Christ to the private and religious spheres of their lives. They see Christ, perhaps, on church on Sunday and in stained glass windows but they don't see, nor do they want to see Christ, in the factory or school or in what's going on in South Africa or Europe or Oxford. They don't walk or talk with Christ therefore they don't recognize his presence. They don't feel his presence because they've removed themselves from where he is in the world.

3. But there's a third category of person who's a Christian, who walks and talks with Christ, and yet is rarely aware of the presence of Christ. Our Gospel lesson describes just that kind of person.

It's late afternoon on the first Easter Sunday. Two disciples are walking to the town of Emmaus about seven miles from Jerusalem. They're deeply distressed, depressed about recent happenings. The Risen Christ draws near and goes with them but their eyes were kept from recognizing

him. They begin to talk with the Risen Christ unaware of who he is. They're walking and talking with the Risen Christ but they don't recognize him. They don't feel the presence of the Risen Christ. In fact, far from feeling his presence, ^{They're} ~~they~~ actually aware of his absence.

Now this is a strange situation but I don't believe it's really that uncommon. I believe that many men and women who walk and talk with Christ don't feel his presence. They simply aren't given to religious kinds of experiences. These men and women often become depressed. They wonder if they're even Christians. ~~They're amazed when they hear fellow Christians talk of visions of angels.~~ Other Christians speak of how real and present the Risen Christ is to them and these poor souls who trust in Christ, but who don't feel the presence of Christ, think, "Can I be a Christian? Why don't I have these religious experiences?"

There may be more than a few of you here this morning who're like this. You walk with Christ. By that I mean you want to obey Christ in your everyday life. Your faith in Christ affects your life at home and at work. And you talk with Christ. By that I mean that you pray. Maybe you don't pray long, fancy prayers. Maybe you wouldn't dare pray in public. Nevertheless you pray. There may be many times throughout the day when you find yourself saying a short prayer, "Lord, thank you for this beautiful scenery." "Lord, thank you for this beautiful weather." "Lord, thank you for giving me strength to do what was right." Your prayers may not even be vocalized, nevertheless your attitude and desires speak of your desire to commune with the Lord. You walk and talk with Christ but you don't feel his presence. In fact, you often feel Christ is absence, terribly absent from your life.

St. Luke says of the two on the road to Emmaus that "their eyes were

1. They don't recognize *Them* in the presence of Christ
2. They are depressed. Sad, hopeless — Jesus alive but they are sad

kept from recognizing him." In other words, it's not their fault that they don't recognize or feel the presence of Christ. They're not like the Soviet cosmonaut who didn't see God because he didn't believe. They're not like the disobedient Christian who has removed himself or herself from Christ's will and therefore doesn't feel his presence. It's Christ who keeps their eyes from recognizing him.

Many men and women who trust in Christ and yet who rarely feel his presence feel guilty because of their lack of felt experience. If they can't manage to see Christ, it must be their fault. Maybe they haven't prayed enough. Maybe they don't read the Bible enough. Maybe they should go to more religious meetings. And so they feel guilty. And yet St. Luke tells us that it wasn't the fault of these two on the road to Emmaus that they didn't recognize the presence of Christ. It was Christ, Christ's-own-self, who kept them from recognizing him.

But you say, "Jesus kept their eyes from recognizing him because they were foolish and slow of heart to believe. If people simply trust in Christ and believe the Bible they'll feel the presence of Christ. And if they don't feel Christ's presence it's because they're not walking closely with Christ."

I simply don't believe that's always true. These two on the road to Emmaus were no more foolish or slow of heart to believe than anyone else. None of the disciples were quick of heart to believe in the Risen Christ and none of us are either. They all forsook Christ and fled. None of them readily believed the news of the resurrection. They all were foolish and slow of heart to believe.

Not only that but there are a number of stories in the Bible which tell of people who trust in the Lord and yet aren't aware of God's presence.

Think of Jacob in the Old Testament who woke up from a strange dream one morning in the wilderness and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it." Or think of Mary Magdalene in the garden alone on that first Easter morning. She loved Christ and Christ was present but she didn't recognize him. She mistook him for the gardener. Or think again of the story of the last judgment in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus says that when the Son of Man returns he'll divide the nations into two groups. Those who ministered to Christ and those who didn't. Those who ministered to Christ are unaware that they did anything for him. They fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited prisoners, housed the homeless and yet they were unaware that it was Christ to whom they were ministering. They walked and talked with Christ and yet we completely unaware of his presence.

Now I find a strange sort of comfort in all this. Maybe when we don't feel the presence of Christ, the Lord is closer than we realize. ^{last night} Maybe if you are one who often feels, not the presence of God, but the absence of God, there may be the experience of his presence - as Paul Tillich points out-- "in the empty space that cries out to be filled by him" (see Steimle, God the Stranger).

And yet before the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is over the Risen Christ does for one brief moment open their eyes to recognize himself. "When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him."

For the early church there's little question that this pointed to the experience of the living Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The early Christians were assured of the presence of Christ not on the basis of

religious experiences or feelings but on the basis of his hidden presence in the sacrament of Holy Communion. That's why the early Christians celebrated the Sacrament weekly and even daily. In a world in which they experienced so much of the absence of Christ, here, in the Sacrament, they were assured of his presence even when they didn't feel it.

But no sooner had Jesus revealed himself in the breaking of the bread, he disappeared again. Once more they became aware of his absence. But now they were filled with joy. They knew he was alive even when they could not see him. They knew he was present with them, even when they did not feel his presence.

And to you who are like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who walk and talk with the Lord but rarely feel his presence I very much want you to be encouraged by this story. Continue to walk with Christ. Continue to talk with Christ in prayer even when you don't feel Christ's presence. Christ is present even when we don't feel his presence. His presence in no way is dependent on our feelings. He is with us always, even when we don't feel him... perhaps *especially* when we don't feel his presence.

Let us pray: O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

EbzZ