

Reflection for Monday 13th July 2020

Yesterday Revd Gerry spoke about the three times Jesus reappeared after his death and resurrection, first to Mary Magdalene and a couple of the disciples (depending on which Gospel version you are reading), then to the disciples who were gathered together behind closed doors, and thirdly to the disciple fishermen on the seashore.

I was reflecting on these three appearances most of yesterday afternoon and evening. Thinking about the emotions they must have been feeling in each situation as Gerry named yesterday – fear, confusion and doubt. Thinking about how the appearance of Jesus brought them the reassurance they needed. Thinking also about how they didn't at first recognise Jesus – and wondering how through my own doubts and fears, how many times I have failed to recognise the Christ in someone.

My particular favourite is the story of Mary Magdalene at the tomb. Her devotion was a quiet one. I get a sense of her creeping in the dark, unsure and yet determined in her duty.

Below is an image of that very scene that I found many years ago in a bookstore. I don't know where it came from but it's on stiff card so I wonder if it was part of set of flashcards to hold up when telling the story. It is a favourite image of mine for many reasons, some of which I will share with you today.

But first let's take a few moments to look at the image while I read the narrative to you from John 20: 11-16

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."

At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").



“Mary!” said the voice

Take note of the body language of Jesus, with arms outstretched, Mary on the other hand is reclining away from him, perhaps in fear and confusion. This must be the very point just before he says her name and she realises it is him. In contrast to Jesus’ hands being open in a gesture of welcome, Mary’s hands are curled into a little ball, perhaps signifying the closed nature of her mind at that point when she still thought Jesus was dead – or perhaps she is comforting herself in her distress. Her hands are covering her heart and Jesus’ chest is not covered – showing us perhaps that his heart is open.

If you look closely, you can see the wound on Jesus’ hand.

At the very bottom of the picture we see the tomb door open. We only see a sliver of the dark open doorway, but for us who know the story of the tomb stone having been rolled away, it is enough. In front of the doorway we see Mary's oil jar and richly decorated pot for the spices. These spices were not cheap but in her duty Mary has brought them to care for the dead body of Jesus she was expecting to find.

Jesus' gaze is fixed on Mary.

Mary's gaze is, I feel, looking a little beyond Jesus, she is looking up at him but not quite meeting his gaze at this moment. This is one of the precious parts of this illustration for me, that there is space between them, they are connected and Jesus' gaze is holding them together in this moment, just as his arms are wide open holding the physical space for them both. But Mary is looking still a little confused and I wonder if this is the moment seconds before he says her name and if she is wondering what she sees, something familiar maybe, something that resonates but she is just not sure what. Is she looking for hope in the face of a stranger but suddenly that stranger says her name and she realises that she has been looking on the face of her Lord.

I wonder how many times, like Mary, I have gazed on the face of stranger, and not realised I was looking into the face of Christ. How many times have I missed seeing the Christ in anyone, everyone that I meet. How many times have I deliberately looked away because I didn't want to recognise the Christ in someone else because of my own prejudices, preconceptions or selfishness?

Many, many times.

It's a very soft image – one that reminds me very much of the illustrations from my children's Bible as a child, but it is one that challenges me at the deepest level. I know that Jesus' gaze is fixed on me. I feel that loving stare some days more than others, but I am always aware of it – but some days I am not aware that it comes from the face of another, and some days it comes from the face of that "other" that perhaps I find most difficult.

I encourage you today to think about and give your thanks for the loving gaze of Jesus. That moment when he calls your name, and you hear him. But also give your prayers for all those times you have, like me, no doubt missed recognising Jesus in the face of another.

Give your thanks and praise for all the times that you have been the "other", gazing with Jesus' love, particularly offering up your prayers for those times you have not been recognised.

Pray for the spaces between.

Pray for meeting each other's gaze, and to be held by the loving gaze of Jesus.

Pray for God's love and guidance. Join with me in asking him to help you see, and feel, and hear and smell and touch his presence in every aspect of our lives. That we

may live more fully and recognise and delight in those moments when he touches our lives with the sweetness of calling our names.

Brother, sister, let me serve you;
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christlight for you
in the night time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping;
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow,
till we've seen this journey through.

5. When we sing to God in heaven,
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, sister, let me serve you;
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.