

3 April 2016

When I was a child, I was allowed to walk to and from school on my own as soon as I could safely cross the road, and from quite an early age, I was pretty much allowed to disappear all afternoon during weekends, just so long as I was home by dinner time. Now I am not suggesting the world was a totally safe place back then. It wasn't, and I can remember the police visiting my school and warning us about strangers. We were never actually told what was so bad about them, but we clearly understood we should never ever go anywhere with a stranger, and that we should not believe them if they tried to tell us our parents had sent them.

One day, when I was probably about seven or eight, a man approached me outside my school, and said my mother had sent him to meet me. I didn't recognise him. What's more, he had a beard, so he *had* to be dodgy.

I was not in the least bit frightened. Quite the contrary. We had all been warned about strangers, but now I had actually got to meet one. I felt like a trophy hunter who had just spotted a fine specimen of some exotic species. Now it was time for the kill. I stood upright, stared him in the eye, and with that simultaneously rising volume and intonation that only a pre-pubescent boy can achieve, proclaimed, "NO! I'm not going ANYWHERE with YOU! YOU'RE a STRANGER!"

The stranger froze. So did everyone else within earshot. Excited chatter suddenly became overwhelming silence, and parents who

had come to collect their children glared at the stranger with collective malicious intent. The stranger looked terrified, like a possum caught in headlights. For the first time in my life, I found myself in control of a potentially serious situation, and I must confess I was enjoying it.

The stranger stammered he really had been sent to meet me. That wasn't good enough. I didn't know this bearded deviant. He named my mother. I didn't blink. He named my brother. I started to wonder ever so slightly. I think he might have then named our family cat and dog. I thought a little bit more, not allowing myself to be rushed. Perhaps my mother really had sent him. But I wasn't going to take any chances. I finally agreed to accompany him, but only on the condition that he walked well in front of me, and I frogmarched him home like a captured prisoner of war.

I will never forget the expression on my mother's face when she saw me escorting the hapless prisoner through the back gate. When she finally managed to stop laughing, all was revealed. The stranger was indeed a family friend who lived out of town and had made an unexpected visit. Mum had sent him to meet me, and give me a surprise. However, he had grown a beard since I had last seen him, and it simply had not occurred to Mum that I might not recognise him.

Today is the Second Sunday of Easter, also known as Low Sunday and the Sunday of St Thomas. The events described in today's gospel reading caused St Thomas to be given the nickname 'Doubting Thomas', and like most unwanted nicknames, it stuck. But we can't really blame poor old Thomas for having a few doubts.

Jesus had said numerous times he was going die but he would rise again, but nobody seemed to understand him. I very much doubt if anybody seriously expects him to come back to life. Healing the sick and feeding large crowds is one thing. But coming back from the dead after having been mutilated by Roman scourging and crucifixion is something else. So despite all the times he had told his friends he would rise again on the third day, Jesus was buried, and I very much doubt any of them are expecting to see him alive again.

But the post resurrection Jesus is different to what Jesus was like before he was crucified. He now appears and disappears in ways he never did previously. Twice during today's reading he suddenly appears in a locked room. And while his friends recognise him on both of these occasions, there are other occasions when he is not recognised straight away, such as when the women visit his tomb, and when Cleopas and his companion encounter Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

But once Jesus is recognised, there is no doubt it is really him. Just like I had no trouble remembering our family friend once his true identity had been revealed to me.

Some of you will remember the theological controversies that surrounded Professor Lloyd Geering back in the 1960s. In particular, his statement, "The resurrection of Jesus is *not* an historical event", and his quotation of Professor Gregor Smith's view that "... we may freely say that the bones of Jesus lie somewhere in Palestine", in a 1966 article, caused considerable outrage. Professor Geering was not actually saying anything new. Such ideas had long been

discussed in theological circles. What he did that was so radical was to bring these ideas into the public arena.

Now I am not for a moment suggesting I agree with his position. However, I am grateful he opened up these issues for wider discussion. Our faith not only permits us to ask difficult questions and to sometimes have doubts, I would suggest it requires us to have questions and occasional doubts. Otherwise it would not be faith at all, but blind acceptance.

There are many issues that Christians in different churches have different views on, such what we recognise as sources of theological truth, the place of scripture, what books are in the Bible, the nature of the Eucharist, which theories of atonement we accept, and so on. But the resurrection of Jesus is pretty central to the Christian faith. People who identify as Christians overwhelmingly believe Jesus is risen from the dead.

And I would suggest that if Jesus isn't risen from the dead, the Church would be little more than a self help club with a little bit of spirituality thrown in.

Humankind was estranged from God, but we were given a way to be reconciled. And that was for God to become fully human in Jesus the Christ, experiencing the joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, and high hopes and broken dreams that are part of human life. Including death.

Jesus went to the cross with self-sacrificing love, and he triumphed over death and sin with his resurrection, and we can be confident

that we too can share in his risen life. And that is what we are celebrating during our journey through the 50 days of Easter.

Now I have a challenge for us. And that is to ask ourselves whether we would recognise Jesus if he were in our midst today.

My favourite chapter in the Bible is Chapter 25 of Matthew's gospel, and I would like to read you a short excerpt:

34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." 37 Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" 40 And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."¹

Jesus has told us where can find him. So if we are looking for Jesus, we should seek out someone who is hungry or thirsty, a stranger, or someone who can't afford clothes, is sick, or is in prison, and have no doubt it really is him.

So as we prepare ourselves to meet Jesus in the sacrament of the Eucharist, let us meditate on some words that have been attributed to St John Chrysostom. “If you cannot find Christ in the beggar at the church door, you will not find him in the chalice.”²

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<http://theword.tk>

¹ Matthew 25:34-40 (NRSV)

² St John Chrysostom (attributed)