

Easter 3  
St. Luke 24:13-35  
April 30, 2-17  
St. George's Bolton  
Fr. Chris

## God in Our Parking Lot Today

*"While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him."*

One time, when I was visiting Burbank in California, I decided to take a tour of the NBC Studios where many television programs are taped, including the Tonight Show, at least back in those days. Because I would be leaving town the next day after I took the tour and would be towing a small travel trailer, I stopped by the guard kiosk to ask where I should park for the tour. This was explained to me, and the guard asked me to pull a U-Turn around the kiosk to exit, I started forward a few feet and noticed an old

Rolls Royce convertible from the late 1920's lumbering slowly my way with a driver who had long grey hair blowing in the light breeze. It could have been an older woman, I thought, at the distance I was.

I had plenty of time to make my Pontiac Van do the U-turn in front of the antique car headed my way. As I pulled up to the exit gate, the old convertible pulled up next to my van. "Hey welcome, ...you guys are from back home...*(my van was obviously sporting Connecticut plates)* ...I am from Massachusetts!"

As I looked over at the driver, I was stunned. Here, sitting next to me in an antique Rolls Royce convertible was a man from Massachusetts whom you all know, who worked at NBC. It was none other than Jay Leno, former host of the Tonight Show that I hoped to tour the set of the next day. He started to greet us and struck up a conversation about how things were going back home, telling me he had noticed the license plate from far away, "back home," as he called it. I asked if I might take his picture, and he was very nice about it, and said, yes. I got out my camera and fervently tried to snap his photo, but failed. Just then he said, "He dummy, take the lens cap off!" Which I did-and success! At that moment a hoard of paparazzi came up and interrupted our chance meeting and he had to leave. As soon as I recognized him, he was gone. I did see him the next day, when I was back for the tour, in the staff parking lot by his studio, pulling up and getting out of his convertible Ferrari. He remembered me from the day before, as his friend from Connecticut, imagine that...

Dorothy and Lemyra Gibbs were two of the great saints of St. John's Episcopal Church in Waterbury, Connecticut, my first parish. It had been their parish for decades. They were part of an Intercessory Prayer Group that met weekly for prayer and lunch. One of the activities I thought I could provide at the church was a weekly Bible Study for them.

So we would gather in the church lounge. I would prepare carefully for the sessions, reviewing my Biblical materials and searching all the available scholarship I had on the passage. I would pontificate for much of the hour, unaware that I was doing much, if not most of the talking. How patient these ladies were!

One morning, after my long pedagogical meanderings, I asked one of those pithy questions about the meaning of a passage. Some of the group were fearful to speak...waiting for my predesigned and so-called "correct" answer to fall from my lips. Of course I took the opportunity to release more hot air into the room. And then, something quite special happened: Dorothy Gibbs answered the question in a simple sentence which cut to the core of its meaning and revealed the true answer to my question about the teaching of Jesus. I was dumb-struck. You know you have heard truth when it is spoken to you.

And why? Here I was, this 24 year old ordinand, looking down upon these poor "*uneducated*" ladies, most of whom, like Dorothy were in their late seventies or early eighties. But, I was the one who was uneducated and inexperienced here! Dorothy had boiled down the meaning of the passage and expressed it in one simple sentence, revealing the truth in a way anyone could understand. What I didn't understand was the import of a lifetime of prayer, daily study of the scriptures, and years of Christian living experience, which these women so obviously possessed. I was the one in the presence of a *great scholar and saintly woman*. Who was I to be teaching her anything? Here, in humility was an alter Christus, (another Christ) a saint of God, and I had not appreciated it! At once I could understand how those disciples on the road to Emmaus must of have felt at the moment Jesus blessed and broke the bread in front of them. A light goes off in your mind, scales fall from your eyes, and you are humbled by what you did not see before, right in front of you.

I sat in class with Mark Nichols at my seminary when I was studying in a post-graduate program with him. He was just another guy in my class. Mark had been a priest for a few years,

about as many as myself and was maybe only a couple of years older than me. I learned he was trained as a puppeteer in college, and had exercised his career choice for several years in Los Angeles before he pursued a seminary education. He felt particularly drawn to missionary work, and decided to start a seminary to train lay leaders and candidates for the priesthood in the Sudan where he had been working. We weren't that close, I'm sorry to say, as I might have learned something from him if I had listened more and taken the time, but back then, I was pretty full of myself. We shared a few lunches together and sat in together on every class and seminar, so we got to know one another well, *or so I thought*.

After graduating, I would see his picture, if you could call it that, from time to time in Church publications. I say that, because you would see a group of Bishops visiting in the Sudan, and perhaps other luminaries, and there, obscured in the background of the pictures, would be Mark, as though he had ducked down to avoid being photographed. So you would only catch a small glimpse of him, a sliver, and I recognized him because I knew him from three years plus in school. I read in other Church publications how he never really got his dream of starting a seminary off the ground. This was not because he didn't try, but because of the heavy and extreme Christian persecution that was going on in the late 1980's and 1990's in Sudan. Instead of building a seminary, he led thousands of Christian refugees on a 1000 + mile march to save their lives for another day.

And the next thing I heard about Mark was that he returned to England. He was not there on a vacation or sabbatical, but for treatment for a stomach cancer that would soon take his life. Leave it to Mark, though, to return to his ministry and friends in the Sudan. He flew back "home" and at the airport,

when his plane landed, he was greeted by more than a million Sudanese people. What a tribute. Upon his death, he was revered as the patron Saint of the Sudanese Christian community and Church.

Here was an extraordinary Christian, a saint, who I talked with about the events and stories in the Bible, and I did not know it until in hindsight, when my eyes were opened. I was so privileged to even walk on the same ground and sit in the same room as this fine Christian example, who was as humble as Dorothy Gibbs and lacked all pretension like Jay Leno who came up and chatted with a tourist and stranger so many years ago.

The Holy in the ordinary. Sometimes you just don't know where or when you will meet Jesus! The Holy is infused *in and with* the ordinary and surrounds you, I have found. The Holy One is not riding around in a limousine, but is sitting next to you in church, or riding in the car on the highway next to you, or walking past you on the street, or standing on a street corner with a sign asking for contributions because they are homeless. You encounter the Holy One in the midst of life, and we often don't know it until much later on.

Why is that, do you think? Why are our eyes kept from recognizing the Holy One? *Is it God doing this or us?* I think maybe it is because God doesn't need to be noticed, praised and exalted. God is humble too. That was what was so surprising about Jesus when God walked about on this earth. Everyone expected a political leader, a king, a general in the army, a high priest, a bishop, a pope, a super-hero, a super-star. Remember the rock opera by that name? *Jesus Christ, Superstar?*

And we still expect that, not a pope who drives around in a little ordinary Fiat, as Pope Francis did this past week in Egypt. Not a bishop who volunteers on a Foodshare Truck, like one of ours does. We meet the risen Lord in ordinary corners and places of life. Sometimes we are given the privilege of a conversation. Sometimes God speaks to us through one of these vessels of holiness. If we are not looking, not listening, not seeing the ordinary for what it might be and who might be in the midst of it, then we will walk about in blissful ignorance.

Yesterday I was at the Wadsworth Athenaeum for the Annual Flower exhibit. I noticed a huge photo on the wall of one of the galleries just beyond the main lobby on Main Street, a picture of a man who had not spoken a word in years and spent his time in quiet prayer. It was a picture of a Cistercian, cloistered monk wearing his hood over his head. His eyes staring out from the photo spoke a thousand words. This is the Holy to be seen in the ordinary...maybe you can catch it the next time you are there. AMEN