

"I've got some good news and some bad news to tell you. Which would you like to hear first?" the farmer asked. "Why don't you tell me the bad news first?" the banker replied. "Okay," said the farmer, "With the bad drought and inflation and all, I won't be able to pay anything on my mortgage this year, either on the principal or the interest." "Well, that is pretty bad," said the banker. "It gets worse," said the farmer. "I also won't be able to pay anything on the loan for all that machinery I bought, not on the principal or interest." "Wow, is that ever bad!" the banker admitted. "It's worse than that," the farmer continued. "You remember I also borrowed to buy seed and fertilizer and other supplies. Well, I can't pay anything on that either " principal or interest." "That's awful," said the banker, "and that's enough! What's the good news?" "The good news," replied the farmer with a smile, "is that I intend to keep on doing business with you." (1) I don't know if that was good news for the banker or not.

Two of the disciples of Jesus were on the road that leads to Emmaeus. They were as low as that farmer " if not lower. Puzzling things were going on that they did not understand. Their Master had been crucified like a common thief. They in turn had scattered like frightened sheep. But now there were reports that their Master was not dead at all. Reliable sources told them that he had appeared to some of their most trusted friends. Was it real? Was he really alive? The disciples were troubled and afraid. Should they believe the good news or the bad?

And that's our dilemma, isn't it? DO WE BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS OR THE BAD? The good news is that Christ is alive. The bad news is how little impact that event is having in the world today.

TIME magazine carried an interesting article sometime back by Robert Wright titled "The Evolution of Despair." In this article, Wright compared primitive societies to our own. He wasn't praising one and condemning the other. He was just pointing out some of the changes that have taken place. For example, he says, we don't have to slavishly emulate, say, the Old Order Amish, who use no cars, electricity or alcohol; but we can profitably ask why it is that they suffer depression at less than one-fifth the rate of people in nearby Baltimore. And it is striking that when a Western anthropologist tried to study depression among the Kaluli of New Guinea, he couldn't find any.

Or how do you explain this? The anthropologist Phillip Walker has studied the bones of more than 4,000 children from hundreds of preindustrial cultures, dating back to 4,000 B.C. He has yet to find the scattered bone bruises that are evidence of "battered-child syndrome." In some modern societies, Walker estimates, such bruises would be found on more than 1 in 20 children who die between the ages of one and four. Walker suggests a couple of possibilities: 1) unwanted children in primitive societies were often killed at birth, rather than resented and brutalized for years; 2) the public nature of primitive child rearing, notably the watchful eye of a child's aunts, uncles, grandparents or friends. In the ancestral environment, there was little mystery about what went on behind closed doors because there weren't any.

Certainly these are important factors. But who can deny that something is happening to us as a people? Among the Aranda Aborigines of Australia, the anthropologist George Peter Murdock noted early this century, it was common for a woman to breast-feed her neighbor's child while the neighbor gathered food. Today, in America, it's no longer common for a neighbor to borrow a cup of sugar.

There is a growing sense that in the midst of our great affluence, in the midst of our impressive military power and technological prowess, at heart we are a sick society. Some commentators are predicting that as we become a more socially isolated society " as people go into their cocoons and lose human contact FB friends are they really friends? except that provided by a TV screen and a computer modem " we will become a less caring, more violent society. After all, during the 1950s, various American cities saw theft rates jump in the particular years that broadcast television was introduced. (2) What's to happen when a generation is literally reared by broadcast television?

I don't want to sound pessimistic this morning, but the contrast is startling. On one hand is the good news of Christ. On the other is the bad news of the world. As they were making their journey, they were trying to make sense of their situation " trying to make sense of their world " trying to make sense of their future. Many of us have been there, haven't we? AND THEN JESUS COMES TO THEM. This is significant. Jesus doesn't wait for them to find him. Jesus comes to them.

There is a gipping story of a traveler who was walking along the road one day when a man on horseback rushed by. There was an evil look in his eyes and blood on his hands. Minutes later a crowd of riders drew up and wanted to know if the traveler had seen someone with blood on his hands go by. They were in hot pursuit of him. "Who is he?" the traveler asked. "An evil-doer," said the leader of the crowd. "And you pursue him in order to bring him to justice?" asked the traveler. "No," said the leader, "we pursue him in order to show him the way." (3) The picture we have in the New Testament is of a God who pursues us so that God may show us the way. Christ comes to the two disciples. They do not recognize him, but it is he who takes the initiative. He walks with them and interprets Scripture for them.

We need to hear this word about the Christ who comes to us. Often we think we must pound on Heaven's door to get God's attention. "If I just pray often enough, if I get on my knees, if I clean up my life, if I serve the church, than maybe God will notice my situation, maybe then God will open the door." But the picture the New Testament gives us is not of our pounding on God's door, but of Christ gently knocking on ours. We are the ones with an attention problem. Christ continually comes to us, but like those two disciples on the road to Emmaeus, we do not recognize him.

There is a story of a British soldier in the First World War who lost heart for the battle and deserted. Trying to reach the coast for a boat to England that night, he ended up wandering in the pitch black night, hopelessly lost. In the darkness, he came across what he thought was a signpost. It was so dark that he began to climb the post so that he could read it. As he reached the top of the pole, he struck a match to see and found himself looking squarely into the face of Jesus Christ. He realized that, rather than running into a signpost, he had climbed a roadside crucifix. Then he remembered the One who had died for him . . . who had endured . . . who had never turned back. The next morning the soldier was back in the trenches. (4) Maybe that's what you and I need to do in the moments of our distress and darkness " strike a match in the darkness and look on the face of Jesus Christ. For Christ is here. He comes to us just as he came to those two disciples on the road to Emmaeus even though we may not recognize him. He takes the initiative. He knocks on the door.

When the two disciples arrived at Emmaeus, they were so enraptured with their new friend whose identity they did not know, that they begged him to stay with them. And so he did. And then something very beautiful and mysterious occurred. While they were having the evening meal, Christ broke the bread, just as he did at the last meal they had shared together before his crucifixion and he blessed it. And suddenly their eyes were open and they recognized him " and then, Luke tells us, he vanished. When the two disciples realized what had happened, they began to recall how much they had received as Christ interpreted the word to them on the road from Jerusalem. And they hurried off to tell their story to the rest of the disciples.

Now here is what we cannot miss: CHRIST REVEALS HIMSELF TO US THROUGH HEARING THE WORD AND THE BREAKING OF BREAD. Here is why we come to this house of worship. Christ is continually coming to us, but we may not recognize who he is. But when we read his Word and when we participate in the Sacraments of his church, we come to see who he is. You see, our tendency is to look for Christ in the extraordinary, the spectacular, the breathtaking. Remember in SUPERMAN: THE MOVIE when Superman first reveals his superpowers to the world? Lois Lane is dangling from a cable, high atop the Daily Planet building, screaming at the top of her lungs. Just as she begins her long fall to earth, Superman

changes into his flashy red, yellow, and blue outfit and swoops up to catch her in midair. "Don't worry, Miss," he assures her, "I've got you."

"You've got me," she exclaims. "Who's got you?"

Just then the helicopter that has been perched on the edge of the building begins to fall straight toward them and the crowd below. But Superman merely grabs it with his one free arm and gently sets both it and Lois safely back on the landing pad. When he turns to leave, an astonished Lois stammers out the words, "Who ARE you?"

"A friend," Superman replies warmly, and as he flies straight up into the air with a sort of half twist Lois faints in a heap. (5) That's the way we would like for Christ to come to us. And that is why we miss him. Christ reveals himself as he has always revealed himself " through the Word and through the Sacraments " through the study of Scripture and the breaking of Bread. That is why when we need encouragement we go to our Bibles or we go to our church. Because there, Christ is revealed in all his glory.

A missionary who was once imprisoned by the North Koreans hid a tiny New Testament in his cell among his meager possessions. One day the guards found it, took him from his cell, beat him, and kicked him with their hobnailed boots until he lay bloody and panting with exhaustion. He later testified, "Suddenly, to their astonishment I began to laugh softly with joy, for I discovered that even after all that brutality I could love them." He went on, "As the blows were coming down on me, the Holy Spirit brought to my memory the word I needed to hear: You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you"" (Matthew 5:43-44). He concluded, "They took my Testament from me, but they could not steal the Word, for I had hidden it in my heart!" (6) Ben Weir, the Presbyterian missionary who was for so long a hostage in Lebanon, speaks movingly about worshiping while in captivity. Every Saturday night, he saved a piece of bread from dinner, and on Sunday morning he would eat that piece of bread and feel greatly moved by the sense of communing with God's people all over the world. Even in prison, the bread brought him into the presence of the Lord. (7)

So what do you do when the world assaults you with bad news? What do you do when you feel all alone and lose contact with Christ? How do you experience his presence and encouragement once more? Millions of Christians have found comfort in these two primary means of Grace: Reading God's Word and joining with other Christians in breaking bread in the Lord's Supper. There Christ is revealed.