Come, Holy Spirit, what we know not, teach us; what we have not, give us; what we are not, make us: for Jesus Christ’s sake. Amen.

“He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him.” (Lk. 24:30–31)

Many’s the sermon I’ve preached on that verse from today’s Gospel. A room, in an unimportant village called Emmaus, just a few days after all hope had been cruelly snuffed out by Roman soldiers on a cross of rough-hewn wood. Two friends in the depths of sadness and despair. Unnamed disciples trying to talk through their grief but still compassionate enough to make space for an unknown, unrecognised stranger joining them on the road. And then as night falls, an invitation, an extension of hospitality to a simple meal at the end of a journey, when the stranger “took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized [Jesus]” (Lk. 24:30–31). Four simple actions, an encounter opening up a world of change.

Now that’s usually been my cue to talk about Eucharistic theology. To invoke those giants of Anglican sacramental thought, Gregory Dix and David Stancliffe. To help us be drawn more deeply into that mystery we’re about to share, as we prepare to come to the altar rail and stretch out our hands to ‘become what we see and receive what we are, the Body of Christ’ (Augustine, Sermon 272). But of course today is different. Lockdown and Covid have changed everything. Today bread will still be taken, blessed and broken by Sarah but not given. Or at least not to most of us. Instead we sit at home trying to do that most difficult of things – make a spiritual communion.

It may be a venerable Christian practice of the worldwide church, one specifically rethought by Cranmer and the Reformers for the CofE but it was always known to be hard. Because matter matters and a key reason God uses the sacraments to reach out to us
with his grace is because we’re bodily people – we need touch, taste, smell, the data of our physical senses to help open us up to spiritual truths. We need the faithfulness of bread and wine obeying the words of their Creator in becoming the Body of Christ to help us, with our sinful hearts, broken lives, obey those same words too. And it’s not just that it’s hard but it was always meant to be exceptional – something for the end of life or times of plague, when ‘just impediments’ got in the way (BCP rubrics to the Visitation and Communion of the Sick). And yes, we are in a time of plague and this is exceptional but in our fast-paced world, it’s also becoming normal – not something done on the three occasions a year when sharing in Communion was deemed essential but done week by week or for some of us day by day.

What does it mean? And how does today’s Gospel help us?

Well I’d like to go back a little to the start of the story and link up the four parts. Because Jesus may have been ‘made known in the breaking of the bread’ (Lk. 24:35) but he was no less there in the parts that preceded it. No, Jesus meets the disciples precisely where they are. He comes alongside them in their grief, in their confusion, and he travels with them (Lk. 24:15). They don’t recognise him. The line is translated today, ‘their eyes were kept from recognizing him’ (Lk. 24:16) but that’s probably pushing the Greek ‘ekratounto’ a little too far. Maybe we’d be better simply to say they were not able, not ready, to recognise him. God was there but the disciples did not see him.

And then what happens? They shift from talking about their lives, their story, to talking about the Scriptures, God’s story. ‘Beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted to them all the things said about himself in the Scriptures’ (Lk. 24:27). Here is Jesus himself doing the Liturgy of the Word – taking the Scriptures, blessing them, breaking them open and giving them to the disciples. And again the disciples don’t quite get it. At least not straightaway. Only looking back with hindsight, after the meal, will they reflect and say to one another, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us…, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’ (Luke 24:32)

They didn’t understand it at the time but Christ had come close to them in the experience of their lives and the sharing of their stories. He came to them again in the Word and its interpretation. The breaking of bread opened to them these other modes of his presence; it sent them out with urgency to share the good news and live the Kingdom. But it was never the whole of the story. Source and summit perhaps but there is much else along the way.
For all that this service has its heart is still a eucharist and Sarah taking, blessing and breaking bread in her canonry. For me in my home and for you in yours, we need to engage with that differently and perhaps let our focus be pulled back from the bread and the wine to the Word and one another. We will do our best to make our acts of spiritual communion, to show that true desire, lively faith and genuine love; to trust that the God who knows no boundaries will unite himself to us. But let us also still our hearts, that we might feel them burning within us as we hear Christ’s own voice echoing through the Scriptures; let expectation sharpen our gaze today to see Christ in our homes, in our lives, in one another.

May our prayer be that this moment, when the Eucharist has become something different, become a means to opening up all the ways that God is with us and comes to us day by day. Amen.