

KNOWN EN ROUTE

--At first glance, the story, read moments ago, of the two disciples' encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus seems positively surprising!

Why, to think that they would be out on the highway, just walking along and talking about the events of recent days, when out of nowhere Jesus appears, hikes alongside them, and joins in the conversation.

If you know this story, then you know what follows next, with these three now at table together, and with this mysterious stranger taking bread, blessing and breaking and giving it to them. The fact is not lost on us that, clearly, that's Communion language.

"Then their eyes were opened," the account says, "and they recognized him He was known to them in the breaking of the bread" (24.31,35).

As useful as that line may be in, say, a Communion liturgy, it may well be a conclusion that jumps over something else of considerable note.

--That valuable insight begins with the realization that this story of Jesus' sudden appearance shouldn't surprise us at all.

When we think of it, where else except the road would one expect to encounter him? After all, where else, except the road, has he spent his entire ministry? You've heard all the evangelists' reports. The man is never at home. If there were a Mrs. Jesus, I can guess what she'd be complaining about. I don't know of a single story in any one of the gospel accounts that speaks of Jesus reclined in his Lazy Boy, remote control in hand, watching TV. Not one.

Consistent with that, then, to what else, except the road, has he called his disciples? "Follow me," he invites, and they leave everything and follow him--onto the road. On the basis of these facts alone, really, where else would he find and where else would he be known by his own except en route?

If we read these verses carefully, therefore, not jumping prematurely to the Communion conclusion, we hear that Jesus was already known to them, there on the road. "Were not our hearts burning within us," they say to one another, "when he was talking to us on the road?" (21.32). Before he is fully known to them in the breaking of the bread, he is already known to them in the midst of footsteps en route to Emmaus.

I suspect, in other words, that in the specific way this story is being told, there is a very important point for us of the 21st Century, and it obviously has something to do with that road.

Now wait, don't go get your camper or RV ready just yet! While there is no doubt in my mind that our incurable wonder lust has a decidedly spiritual component to it, I want you to hear me out before you take off for Half Way Dam, let alone for Arizona.

Not only with their feet but also with their hearts, Jesus' disciples are always en route to something else. One can easily tell disciples of Christ from other people, because the disciples are the ones who are in motion. The others are not. It is the difference between the "living" and the "dead," an image that is appealed to in many places in Scripture, where always we are encouraged to be among the former.

--Jesus, now as then, calls us from our established comfort and hoped-for security onto, so to speak, that open highway, where the only thing that is certain is that we shall be stressed and exhilarated by the exposure, that we shall be unnerved and changed for the better by the experience. That is the nature of discipleship.

In summoning people to follow, Jesus knows that if they are to be transformed, they will have to leave their places of sheltered ease and head out onto the roads, where, even on familiar ones, one can never know completely what awaits around the next corner.

If the world is going to change into something resembling the realm of God, then there is a certain stretching and deepening that will have to happen to one person at a time, and there is no better place for that to occur than on the road. We know that, if people simply remain "at home," that great, highly desirable change will never take place.

It is perhaps a very purposeful play on words, where Jesus in John's Gospel says simply, "I am the way, the truth, the life" (14.6). Jesus is the way. The Greek word for "way" is "*odos*," which means, not surprisingly, "road." I am the way, Jesus says. I am the road. In me you see your own route. Watch me, for the way that I go is the way that you, too, must go. I, the way, am showing you, am modeling for you, am demonstrating to you what the road is that you must take. It is a dynamic way, an active way, a way where you join me en route to somewhere and something else.

--According to the Lucan narrative, this traveling for a while with the Lord on the road immediately precedes the disciples' clear discerning of him in the blessed and broken bread.

I wonder if we are not being told that, without such a journeying, this sort of discernment is improbable, if not altogether impossible.

I wonder if we are not being told that, for persons who know little about the road, this bread remains just ordinary bread, and this drink remains merely grape juice; but that, for persons who have experienced the narrow and difficult road with their Lord, for persons who know firsthand the loneliness and blessedness, the thanklessness and joyfulness of this road, that is indeed the invigorating bread of life and that is indeed the stimulating cup of wholeness?

Fellow travelers, on this occasion of Communion, I can't help but wonder if we discern and recognize something remarkable in that bread which is broken for us and in that juice which is poured out for us.

What do you see there?

Has your heart ever burned within you on the road that has brought you here?

What do you see there?

What do you see there?