

Easter Day 2017.

“Supposing him to be the gardener” Jn.20.15.

Encounter with a Hoodie.

On the Monday of Holy Week – visiting a bookshop in Peterborough - I almost ran over a Hoodie. He (or she) stepped into the road right in front of the Smart Car. Now it could have been serious for the Hoodie; it could have been fatal for the Smart Car! Luckily a collision was avoided and I next encountered the same figure outside the Cathedral 2 minutes later. Not only was the figure still hooded but he was also wearing his ear-plugs and quite isolated from the world.

Now this does not surprise me for such a manner of dress seems to be symbolic of our age which is one of isolation, fragmentation and an emphasis on personal agendas. Such hooded figures are commonplace today in all sorts of situations. This particular jaywalking Hoodie reminded me of a dark situation several years ago in Lancashire when, with a Muslim colleague, I attended an Anti EDL march. A group of young lads wearing Muslim Defence League Hoodies were present and making a lot of noise. At one point they lifted up scarves to cover their faces and then the police were seen to get very twitchy indeed. It was in such an anonymous pose that fireworks were thrown into the crowd, as if their scarves gave them immunization, protection, which of course darkness often does.

Who knows what is lurking behind a hooded head? My close encounter with the Hoodie could well have been a close encounter with my tax advisor, my car salesman or even the corporation gardener, for all I knew.

Christ the Stranger.

I share this picture of an isolated youth with you on Easter Day because we celebrate today the death and new life of a similarly isolated youth – the 33 year old Christ who was hung on a tree outside the city and then buried in an anonymous grave. Jesus was considerably more exposed than the Hoodie. He had been stripped of all he possessed and publicly executed as a warning to other potential troublemakers in a region of simmering political discontent. Our Saviour Jesus Christ found himself an isolated stranger and a warning to others. In this form he had more in common with the Hoodie than with ourselves at that stage in the Passion Narrative. His friends had deserted him. Only his mother and her friends stayed the course. His lacerated body was taken away to a tomb, the location of which is still in dispute to this day. All this was in stark contrast to the popularity of Christ up until a few days before. He had been a popular leader of a group of youths, fondly valued by his family and popular too with strangers who had heard of his healing powers and powerful speech. But all this changed after his arrest. On the day that we call Palm Sunday a great crowd followed him into Jerusalem at festival time but it was the same crowd who bayed for his blood outside the courtroom just a few days later.

Christ for All.

Change was in the air and this isolated figure on the cross was to be a huge catalyst for even more change.

Death changes us all. As we follow the progress of the Risen Christ through the resurrection appearances it is important to note that he is not immediately recognized even by his closest friends. All four gospels record an encounter with a stranger. In Matthew Jesus meets the disciples on a hill side and some recognized him but others doubted. In Mark, Jesus criticizes them for their unbelief. Luke records the encounter on the road to Emmaus when Jesus goes unrecognized until the breaking of the bread and St. John records this encounter with Mary and Jesus whom she supposed to be the gardener in our gospel today.

These encounters with a stranger are critical to our understanding of the Resurrection and the way we conduct our lives as Easter People. Not only does the Risen Lord break down that fundamental barrier between life and death – guaranteeing our continuity as those who are baptised into the Risen Christ – but this stranger Christ requires that we change our attitude to strangers for he will always meet us as a stranger. His life and our life ‘has been changed, not taken away’ and at our best we will now search for him in the stranger, the colleague, the distant family member – even the Hoodie or that other supposed terrorist, the churchwarden. What is happening in this Easter period is that our assumptions about one another are being challenged, and especially our attitude to strangers. The Risen Lord encourages us to break down those barriers of strangeness, isolation, suspicion which exist in each of us. This is not to call for a bland uniformity or an acceptance of all attitudes. Jesus before and after the Resurrection remains distinctive but non-judgemental. He gently challenges us by his outlook. So with us, with the Church. We are called to welcome the stranger uncritically for our lifestyle will speak eloquently to guests. But this is challenging for any community. That great spiritual classic, ‘the Rule of St. Benedict’ encourages us to welcome any guest as if they were Christ himself. Monastic communities do it well, as do Jean Vanier’s L’Arche Communities with their particular work and welcome. You will know that the Greeks are very hospitable. The Greek language of our New Testaments uses the word ‘*zenos*’ for stranger but it also means ‘*guest*’. To meet each stranger as a guest is part of that resurrection challenge which we are called to embrace.

It would be a challenge to both me and the Hoodie too. He would have already dismissed my Smart Car as a bourgeois fashion icon as I will have judged him but Christ comes between us and challenges both of us to be a bit more self-critical and welcoming as we look for Christ the stranger.

Amen.