THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

The Jewish exiles, uprooted from their homes and carried off into exile in Babylon, sang in lament, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" One of the great biblical themes is the contrast between exile and homecoming, between fear and alienation on the one hand, and trust and gratitude on the other. It speaks to us because this contrast, this tension, is part and parcel of the human journey, no matter who we are or where we come from.

All of us look for meaning in relationship and comfortable familiarity. Despite the spate of criticism against religion, recent studies have indicated that children are happier when they have religious beliefs and practices to sustain them. The same studies have shown significant increases in childhood depression when they lack these spiritual resources. Generally speaking, as many of those who experienced the Government Resettlement Program in Newfoundland and Labrador, know only too well, we lose our sense of purpose and belonging when we are uprooted physically, culturally or emotionally. Even to rebel, we need something solid to rebel against.

Colonization adversely affected native peoples in Canada and elsewhere, because, in the name of saving them from so-called savagery, children were taken from their families, and deprived of their language and culture in the Residential Schools. There are often similar effects on refugees from battle zones, uprooted

from their homes, herded into camps, or forced to relocate to other lands and cultures. In the Holy Land, Israelis and Palestinians fight over who will be allowed to call their common ancestral territory "home".

The last hundred years have been characterized by the greatest innovation, and the most rapid change in human history. In many ways, this has made us all refugees and exiles, for nothing lasts long enough to be familiar. Our economies are built on old values and policies; we are told to never be content with what we have; and the speed with which things happen, gives us little time to ponder the meaning of our ceaseless activity.

This leaves us with two possible strategies. Some of us look to an ideal and supposedly unchanging past, while others seek frantically to adapt to all the latest theories and fashions. Some of us opt for fearful retreat; others rush frantically to adapt and keep up. We can see both strategies reflected in current tensions within the church, as well as in many of the economic and cultural conflicts around the world.

Both these strategies have, however, been used by the church throughout its long history. The Book of Acts tells us of tensions between the followers of James the brother of the Lord, who saw Christianity as a movement within Judaism, and the disciples of Paul, who minimised the importance of the old Law, and forcefully made it easier for Gentiles to embrace this new faith. It was not long before the church took over festivals like the winter solstice and turned it into Christmas, the coming of Christ, the Light of the world.

Ironically, it has now reverted to its pagan origins. With the end of what we call Christendom, in which faith and society were intimately connected, the church increasingly sees itself as a community of exiles, excluded from the seats of power, and

often made a laughing-stock. The advantage of this may be that we are less likely to be corrupted by power, and able to exercise a more prophetic role. But to do this, we, as the Church, have to get beyond struggling to maintain the structures of power and privilege, and learn to become more mission focused and flexible.

Today's readings may offer us a clue. Two of Jesus' disciples are walking along the road to Emmaus when they are joined by a stranger. They tell him of their grief at the death of Jesus, and he in turn suggests that recent events in Jerusalem are in fact the fulfilment of God's ancient promises. They invite the stranger to dine with them, and in the sharing of the meal, where the stranger breaks bread with them, they discover that "the one who comes to us as one unknown" is their risen Lord.

Luke reminds us how, in the exile of our grief, we can find new life in telling the ancient stories and celebrating the Eucharist.

The other readings give us another dimension, that revelation demands repentance and commitment. With revelation comes the realization of how little we have seen. As the hymn "Amazing grace" puts it: "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see." Revelation causes us to admit our former blindness and ignorance and to turn towards the light.

This is the gist of Peter's speech in Acts, which results in large numbers of people embracing Jesus as Lord.

In the reading from First Peter, which is widely interpreted as a baptismal homily, people are reminded of their need to live by faith "in the time of your exile". This refers to the fact that this mortal life is not our ultimate destiny, and we are "strangers and sojourners" until our final homecoming in God. It also addresses people subject to persecution for their beliefs. Love of God and love of one another are core ingredients of the life of

faith.
In a time of rapid change and uncertainty we all need to admit how little we know. It is not enough to be "with it" and accept all the latest fads and fancies without criticizing them. Nor is it acceptable to retreat into an idealized, frozen past. As people of faith, we always stand between past and future, between history and hope. We can never say we have seen and heard it all. We are always "on the road". Revelation for grieving disciples came through the sharing of stories and hospitality at the supper table. Revelation for us also comes through listening to one another and participating together in the Eucharist. Separation and rejection, whoever initiates it, is a sign of blindness and despair. For the hope that leads to new understandings, and the revelation that offers new life, thanks be to God! Alleluia!

AMEN.