

BIBLE STUDY 6: Recognising Jesus in the stranger

Introduction

The image 'Understanding' by Sieger Koder is part of 'The Folly of God' series of images, published by Pauline Books and Media. It can also be found (and bought) relatively easily on the internet through a google search of 'Sieger Koder, Emmaus.' The image is a representation of the moment when the Emmaus disciples recognise Jesus at the breaking of the bread and when he disappears from their sight.

It is a representation of 'Recognising Jesus in the Stranger.' This is a familiar theme in Catholic Spirituality, especially for example in Benedictine Spirituality. Part of the Rule of St. Benedict is given over to showing hospitality to the stranger. The one who knocks at the door is Jesus! The stranger is Jesus!

The following Bible Study may be done alone or with a group. It involves acquiring a reasonably good quality copy of the image referred to and finding the relevant Scripture passage. First, one reads the Scripture aloud and then reflects on it for some time in silence, perhaps also reading the Reflection offered in the text below. Secondly, one follows the procedure outlined for gazing on the image. Thirdly, one might spend some time with the suggested questions. In a group situation, these might offer food for discussion.

Read: Luke 24:13-35

A Reflection:

As the disciples walked to Emmaus, disillusioned, disappointed, depressed, they encountered a stranger and they welcomed him to join them on the journey. This was to be a journey of discovery, though they did not realise it at the beginning. At first they saw this stranger as a bit out of it, not very well informed, perhaps even as a bit dim? However, when he got to talking, at some stages at least, their hearts burned within them as he spoke; but the penny did not drop immediately. He made to go on. They welcomed him to stay. And then, eventually, in the sharing of bread, their eyes were opened and they recognised Jesus.

Activity: Gazing at 'Understanding' by Sieger Koder

Step 1: Looking

Gaze at the picture. Start with the picture some distance from you. Focus in more closely on the picture. Look at it from different angles. Is there a focal point for you in the picture that draws your attention? Gaze at the point that beckons your particular attention.

Step 2: Meditation

You have found a point in the image that speaks to you. Take it 'inward.' Think on it. Ruminant on it. Let that part of the picture interact with your other thoughts. Are any memories or feelings or desires awakened in you as you gaze?

Step 3: Prayer

Offer to God any hope or desire or word that arise in you as you gaze at the image. Allow yourself to be touched by God, by God's word.

Step 4: Contemplation
Simply rest with God.

Questions

1. What struck me as I read the Scripture and gazed at the picture?
2. Have I ever met Jesus in the stranger? Who? When? What did that feel like?
3. Do I treat every stranger I meet as if they are Jesus present to me in the here and now?

Taking it forward

If I were to treat every stranger I meet as if he or she were Jesus, would my thoughts or actions need to change in any way?

Other suggested Sieger Koder pictures to gaze upon:

Many works of Sieger Koder can be used for reflection on the theme of 'Welcoming the Stranger.' Two others are: 'Das Mahl mit den Sündern' ('The Meal with the Sinners') and 'Werke der Barmherzigkeit' ('Works of Mercy').

'The Meal with the Sinners'

'Das Mahl mit den Sündern' ('The Meal with the Sinners') is based on Mk 2: 'How can he eat with tax collectors and sinners.' The original of this painting is to be found in San Pastore College in Rome where Koder studied. If you wish to search for the picture on the web, one way is to google 'San Pastore, Sieger Koder' and you should find it easily.

In 'The Meal with the Sinners' only the hands of Jesus are shown. He

is sharing bread with a very mixed bag of strange folks around a table. These people are modern representations of 'tax-collectors and sinners,' modern 'rejects of society.' Etched on the back wall of the room where they are sitting around a table is a representation of the Prodigal Father welcoming the Prodigal Son with the Elder Son looking away quite disapprovingly.

A route of reflection probably to be avoided would be to go along the lines of the 'stranger' as 'sinner.' However, a possible more positive route might be to reflect on the Father's warm welcome, on Jesus' warm welcome for those rejected and despised by others and for those rejected and despised by themselves.

'The Works of Mercy'

'Werke der Barmherzigkeit' or 'The Works of Mercy' is a representation of Matthew 25. When I was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, sick, in prison, naked ... This painting is likely to be more difficult to locate on the internet using search engines. However, if one perseveres, it can be found on several websites selling Sieger Koder postcards.

Reflection

Both of these paintings represent mercy, mercy towards the stranger and mercy towards the despised and rejected. In the 1840s, previous generations of Irish people left Ireland and were shown mercy in foreign lands. Many Irish families have relations abroad as a result of this exodus journey into the wilderness. As our ancestors were shown mercy many years ago, as strangers in a new land, might we not now show mercy to strangers in our land.

Freely, freely we have received. Is now the time to freely, freely give?