REFLECTION · IN THE REGISTER OF ST JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

Wholly as Fire

A layman's musing on the road to Emmaus and the great multitude, for the feast of All Saints, a year to the day since Newman was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church. Food for thought, not teaching.

Richard Verver · November 2026

It was put to me this morning, before the coffee had done its work, that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus set out cold and came back on fire: that they had received and received and given nothing, until something in them caught, as a match catches, and from that moment they gave light. It is a fine image, and like most fine images it is half true. I should like to try the other half, because I think St Luke wrote it down for us, and because the feast asks for it.

Look first at the road. Two men are walking away from Jerusalem in the late afternoon, some seven miles, on the third day. They are not idle and they are not silent; they are talking so hotly that a stranger falls in beside them and asks what words these are that they toss back and forth as they go. They stop dead, and their faces are sad. Then comes what I take to be the most comic sentence in the Gospels. Cleopas, a little indignant, asks the risen Lord whether he is the only visitor in Jerusalem who has not heard what has happened there these last days; and our Lord, who of all men alive knew best what had happened there, says mildly, *What things?* and lets him tell it. So Cleopas tells him everything: Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in deed and word, the chief priests, the cross, the women at the tomb at dawn, the angels, the empty grave; and then the saddest words in the Gospel, *we had hoped*. A man who says *we had hoped* is not a cold man. He is a man whom hope has burnt, and who has not yet learnt that it is burning still.

And before they knew anything, they gave. When the stranger made as though he would have gone further, they would not hear of it. *Abide with us*, they said, *for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent.* That is the whole of hospitality in a sentence, offered to a man they did not know at the end of the worst week of their lives, and it has never stopped being prayed. A dying clergyman in Devon made a hymn of it, *Abide with me; fast falls the eventide*, and crowds at football finals have sung it for nearly a hundred years, which seems to me exactly right: the prayer of two tired men on a country road, sung by a stadium. Whatever happened at that table happened because two grieving men pressed a stranger to come in to supper. I cannot call them mere receivers, then. No creature is that. Everything that is has its being from another, and everything that is acts; to be a creature at all is to do both at once. The difference at Emmaus is not between taking and giving. It lies somewhere else, and St Luke tells us exactly where.

It lies in their eyes. *Their eyes were holden*, he says at the beginning, *that they should not know him*; and at the end, *their eyes were opened, and they knew him*. Both verbs are passive, and neither names who did it, which is the Bible's way of speaking of God without taking his name in vain. Nothing in the two men caught fire at the table that had not been burning for seven miles. What changed was that they saw. Then, and only then, they looked back down the road and said one to another, *Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?*

Newman, who had a long life in which to test it, made a law of this. In a sermon he called "Christ Manifested in Remembrance" he set the walk to Emmaus beside Jacob waking from his dream with a stone for a pillow and saying, *Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not*, and he drew the rule that "God's Presence is not discerned at the time when it is upon us, but afterwards, when we look back upon what is gone and over." The burning was real. It was not known. These were not empty men who were afterwards filled; they were hearts on fire that nobody had told.

I spent my twenties as a chemist (a theoretical one, so that most of my filaments were on paper), and the image I should choose is not the match but the filament. A wire heated in a dark room glows long before anyone sees it glow. It radiates at every temperature; but below some five hundred degrees nearly all its light lies in the infrared, where the eye has nothing to catch it with. Then a dull red appears, and it appears first in the dark: physicists still name that point after Draper, who measured it in 1847. Nothing caught in the wire. The light had been there all along, and it crossed into the range of sight. *It is toward evening*, they had said at Emmaus. It was dark enough to see.

And it was not a match, for another reason. A match is magnificent for about four seconds, and then it is a match no longer; it burns by consuming itself, which is what fire does. But the word St Luke uses for the burning heart is the very word the Greek Bible uses for the bush at Horeb, which *burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed*. Moses turned aside to see that great sight. On the road, Luke tells us, the stranger began *at Moses*. I do not think the echo is an accident, and I am quite sure it is not a match.

What opened their eyes? Not a vision, and not an argument. The argument had been made for seven miles: the finest exposition of Scripture ever given, by its Author, and it set their hearts burning without opening anything, which ought to console every preacher whose homily has not visibly opened anyone's eyes. *He took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them*: four verbs that every Christian ear has heard before, at the feeding of the multitude and in the upper room, and hears again at every Mass. He *was known of them in breaking of bread*. The road is the liturgy of the word and the table the liturgy of the Eucharist; the Council speaks of the one table of the word of God and of the body of Christ, and Pope John Paul opened a Year of the Eucharist with a letter that takes its title from the two men's prayer, *Mane nobiscum, Domine*.

Notice the order. The rite was done for them while their eyes were still holden. They did not see first and then receive; they received, and in receiving they saw. That is the old teaching that a sacrament works by

the act done, and not by the warmth of those who come to it; and it is a great mercy, because on most evenings of most lives the eyes are holden and the day has been long. Then *he vanished out of their sight*. I have always taken this to mean that he had not gone anywhere. He was in what he had given them, and there was no further need for him to be seen at the table.

And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem: seven miles back, in the dark, on a full stomach, along the road they had walked out on. I wrote last month of the prodigal son, whose feet had been moving all along and who needed only to be turned round. These two had been walking all day too, and walking the wrong way. The burning did not set them walking. The seeing turned them round, so smartly that they did not even stay to wash up.

When they came in, breathless, they had no chance to say what they had run seven miles to say. The Eleven spoke first: *The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon.* Anyone who has hurried home with great news and found it already being discussed at the kitchen table will know the feeling. But see what it means. Two things that had been happening apart, one on the road and one with Peter, came into one room and were told together; and the apostles' account came first. That is worth remembering on days when we are tempted to think the Church is only ever the people who arrive late with good news, and never the room that receives them. It is both. It needs the room, and it needs the people coming in out of the dark.

Then, *as they thus spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them*. I was told this morning that this is what our Lord meant by *where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*, and so it is: the Council counts that among the ways Christ is present to his Church. But St Luke takes pains that we should not think it the only way, or a figure of speech. *Handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have.* And then he asked whether they had anything to eat, which must be the most domestic question ever put by a risen body. They gave him a piece of a broiled fish (the oldest manuscripts leave out the honeycomb; I have always hoped it was there), *and he took it, and did eat before them*. He was not the meeting. He was a man in the midst of it, with wounds in his hands, eating his supper.

Today, though, the Church does not read Emmaus. She reads the Sermon on the Mount, and the vision of the great multitude, and the twenty-fourth psalm, which asks *who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?*, a question that sends every eye in the pew down to its shoes. So we go up a mountain, and a second suggestion was made to me there: that Sinai spoke in commands, *Thou shalt* and *Thou shalt not*, to men who live by the clock, while the Mount of the Beatitudes speaks in the indicative of eternity, *Blessed are*; and that all the holy mountains, Sinai and Tabor and Calvary and Sion, are in the end one mountain seen from different sides.

Half of this I gladly take. Time is not the music. It is the conductor's beat, which makes no sound of its own and keeps the players from falling over one another; the music is in the score and in the breath of the

players. We put the clocks back an hour last night, and the sun rose this morning exactly when it meant to. But I cannot let Sinai be the metronome. The Ten Words do not begin with a command. They begin, *I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage*: an indicative, and an indicative of rescue, before a single *thou shalt*. God introduces himself, as a good host does, before he mentions the house rules. Nor did the Psalmist think the law a clock. *The commandment of the Lord is pure*, he sang, *enlightening the eyes*; and we have already seen at Emmaus what it is to have the eyes enlightened.

Nor are the mountains one, as anyone who has climbed two in a day can tell you; the knees keep count. The Epistle to the Hebrews sets two of them side by side precisely to tell them apart. *Ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched … but ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect.* That is the feast of All Saints in a single sentence, and it is in the perfect tense: *ye are come*, not *ye shall come*. The mountains are two because a fulfilment needs something to fulfil. When the woman of Samaria asked our Lord which mountain was the right one, he did not tell her that they were all one mountain. He told her that the hour was coming when it would be neither this mountain nor Jerusalem, and that *the hour cometh, and now is*; and then he told her who he was. The place where heaven touches earth is not a hill. It is a man, sitting tired by a well at noon, who has just asked a stranger for a drink.

Then the Beatitudes themselves. It is true, and worth noticing, that the blessings have no verb: in the Greek it is simply *blessed, the poor in spirit*. But that is how the Psalter has always blessed, *Blessed the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly*, and our Lord is singing the psalms here as surely as at any hour of his life. The sixth beatitude, *Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God*, is today's psalm answering its own question: *Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart.* The third is another psalm entire: *the meek shall inherit the earth*. The Sermon on the Mount is not a new grammar of eternity. It is the old songs of Sion, sung at last by the one they were about.

Why, then, should the blessed look like the poor, the mourning, the hungry, the meek and the persecuted, like so much emptiness and loss? I was asked that this morning too, and I think part of the answer is in the eye. Aristotle observed that whatever receives colour must itself be colourless, as the pupil is, or it would see the whole world tinted with itself. We have all met people like that, and been them. The poor in spirit are the clear pupil. They have nothing of their own standing in the way of the light, and so they see. To a world that asks of every soul what it has produced this quarter, a clear eye looks like nothing at all.

But the deeper answer is that these are not the outline of an emptiness. They are the features of a face. The Beatitudes, says the Catechism, depict the countenance of Jesus Christ. He is the poor man; the meek one, *for I am meek and lowly in heart*; the one who wept over Jerusalem and at the grave of his friend; who hungered in the desert; who was persecuted for righteousness' sake. Receiving is not, in him, a lack. The Son receives everything from the Father and lacks nothing, and no one watching a child hold out

both hands for a present has ever mistaken it for poverty. The blessed look empty to the clock for the same reason he did: a world that measures only output has no instrument for a perfection that consists in receiving.

Nor does this mean there is no reward, as though the kingdom were a mood and never a gift. Our Lord uses the plain word for wages: *Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven.* It is the word God spoke to Abram under the stars, *I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward*, where the reward is the Giver himself. St Thomas, having written some millions of words, was asked near the end what he would have for them, and is said to have answered *non aliam mercedem nisi teipsum*: no reward but yourself. He asked for the Author. The Church teaches that our merits are real, and that they are his gifts; the paymaster pays in his own coin, and the coin is himself. And the blessing stands in the present at both ends, *theirs is the kingdom of heaven*, with the future between; as St Thomas also taught, the rewards are begun here, imperfectly, and finished there.

The first reading shows us the end of it all, and it is the strangest arithmetic in Scripture. St John hears a number: a hundred and forty and four thousand, sealed, twelve thousand of every tribe of the children of Israel, named tribe by tribe as solemnly as the begats. Then he looks, and what he sees is *a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues*. The counted people opens into the countless one, and nobody in it has had to give up his own tongue. Heaven, it appears, is not in Latin, which will be a comfort to schoolboys and a small sorrow to some of my friends, and on certain Sundays to me. The rabbis said that a king stamps many coins with one seal and they all come out alike, but that God stamped every man with the seal of the first man and no man is like his fellow; and so, they said, whoever saves a single life is as though he had saved a whole world. The multitude is not a crowd. Newman preached that we see men in masses, in nations and armies, and forget that each is a soul standing before God as though there were no other. The great multitude is a world of worlds, each whole, and each his.

And see how they shine. They are dressed in white, and the elder tells St John where the whiteness came from: *these are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.* It is a strange laundry, and it works. Not one of them shines by a fire of his own. *They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more*: the fourth beatitude, kept. *Neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat*: even the scorching is over. *For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them*; and in the midst is where the Lord stood that night in Jerusalem, asking for fish. At the very end of the book the city *had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.*

The Fathers likened the Church to the moon, because she shines with a light that is not her own. It is a true image, and a safe one, and our Lord did not use it. On that mountain he said, *Ye are the light of the world*, which is the very title he took for himself in the Temple: *I am the light of the world*. He did not give them a lesser name. And in the next breath he said what kind of light he meant: *Neither do men light a*

candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. A candle is lit by another, and the Greek word for lighting it is the word from the road and from the bush. The evangelist says of the Baptist that *he was not that Light*; yet our Lord, speaking of the same man, called him *a burning and a shining light*, a lamp, and the word for burning is the same word again. The saints are not suns, and I do not think, in the end, that they are moons. They are flames.

The boldest thing ever said about it was said in the desert. A monk came to an old abba with the report most of us could give: he kept his little office, fasted a little, prayed, and kept his thoughts as clean as he could; what more could he do? The old man stood up and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps; and he said, *If you will, become wholly as fire.* He kept the little word *as*: iron in the forge glows with the forge's fire and is still iron, and Peter is still Peter. But he said *wholly*. The chapter of Hebrews that brought us to Mount Sion ends, *for our God is a consuming fire*. That is the fire the saints are lit with. It did not consume the bush, and it does not consume them; it only makes them burn.

So the morning's image wanted only one change, and it came to me over lunch. The saints did catch fire; but not as a match catches, by striking itself on the box. They were lit as one candle lights another. The flame is held close to the wick, and for a while nothing seems to happen; then the wick takes, very often before anyone notices. Theirs took somewhere on the road, with the flame walking beside them, and they only saw it was alight at the table. Same fire, twice the light, and nothing lost in the lending. The Church sings this once a year, at the Easter Vigil, when every candle in a dark church is lit, hand to hand, from one; and the Exsultet, which is the only hymn I know that pauses to praise the bees for the wax, says of that flame that though it be divided, it suffers no loss from the light it lends.

That is how saints are made, and I have watched it done. At my son's baptism his candle was lit from the Easter candle by a hand from the family, as the rite asks. This year he and I are reading the Bible backwards from Easter, by candlelight, beginning at Emmaus; the year ends at the Vigil and at his confirmation, and he will stand in the dark with the rest of us and hold out his wick. Same fire. Double light. I do not know a better definition of a family, or of the communion of saints, which is the same thing seen from a great way off, with every road come home and every supper laid.

St Paul has a word for this, and we have made it too tame. *Ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father*; *thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.* We hear *adoption* and think of a guest given a room, kindly allowed to share in the life of the house. Paul's readers heard nothing of the kind. A Roman adopted son took his father's name, his household gods and his inheritance as fully as one born to him; Caesar's heir was his adopted son, and for most of a century the best of the emperors came to the throne the same way. Tacitus gives an old emperor the reason: to be born of a prince is chance, but adoption is a judgement. Birth gives you a family; adoption chooses one. We say *chosen family* now and mean something tender by it. Paul meant something stronger. The adopted son does not share in the life of the family. He is family. Christ is *the firstborn among many brethren*, the eldest of a very large house, and *he is not ashamed to call them brethren*, which, considering what his

brethren are like, is a great deal to say. St John's epistle for today says it outright, in two words that the oldest manuscripts keep and the Authorized Version let fall: *that we should be called the sons of God*; and we are.

It came to me, too, that the Gospels themselves are written backwards. The resurrection comes first, so to speak, and the life is what that risen life looks like. The oldest Christian writing about it is not a Gospel at all but a creed St Paul had received and handed on, that Christ died, and was buried, and rose again the third day, and was seen; the Gospels came after, and their writers do not hide it. *When therefore he was risen from the dead*, St John remarks, *his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them*; and of the ride into Jerusalem, *these things understood not his disciples at the first: but when Jesus was glorified, then remembered they*. A German scholar once called the Gospels passion narratives with long introductions. He might as well have said Easter with a long introduction, written by men who had seen the end and gone back to Galilee to look for it. Emmaus is the method in miniature: beginning at Moses, the stranger read the whole of Scripture backwards from an empty tomb.

It has always been so with the saints. The Church keeps their feasts, as a rule, on the day they died, and calls it their birthday. She writes their lives after she has seen how they ended, and only then can anyone tell which of their days were the burning ones. Newman's law again: known afterwards. St John's epistle, read today, says it in one breath: *Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.* Now we are; it does not yet appear; we shall see. The burning is now. The seeing is coming.

Most of us are still on the road, and from tonight it will be toward evening an hour sooner. Newman, who knew a good deal about walking in the dark, asked for no more than the next step: *Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see / The distant scene; one step enough for me.* He wrote that on a boat becalmed off Sardinia, weak from a fever and a long way from home, and he ended the hymn with the morning and with the people he expected to find there: *And with the morn those angel faces smile, / Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.* Tomorrow the Church prays for all the faithful departed. Tonight she remembers that the faces are there, and that they are smiling.

He chose his own epitaph: *Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*, out of shadows and images into the truth. This little reflection has been nothing but shadows and images, a filament, a pupil and a flame. It is not teaching, and where it strays from the mind of the Church, the Church is right and I am wrong. But the two men on the road found, afterwards, that the Truth had been walking beside them the whole way, and had been courteous enough to let them do most of the talking. I see no reason to suppose he is less patient with us.

TEXTS Gn 15:1; Gn 28:11–16; Ex 3:2–6 (LXX); Ex 20:2; Ps 1:1; Ps 19:8; Ps 24:3–4; Ps 37:11; Mt 5:1–16; Mt 11:29; Mt 13:43; Mt 18:20; Lk 24:13–43 (at 24:42 the honeycomb is wanting in the oldest manuscripts); Jn 1:8; Jn 2:22; Jn 4:6–26; Jn 5:35; Jn 8:12; Jn 12:16; Rm 8:15–17, 29; 1 Cor 15:3–8; Ga 4:4–7; Heb 2:11; Heb 12:18–29; 1 Jn 3:1–3 (at 3:1, *kai esmen*, wanting in the Authorized Version); Rv 7:2–17; Rv

21:23. *Dei Verbum* 21; *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 7; Trent, sess. VI ch. 16 (DH 1548) and sess. VII can. 8 (DH 1608); *Catechism* 1717; Thomas, *ST* I-II q. 69 a. 2; Aristotle, *De anima* II.7; Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 4:5; Tacitus, *Histories* 1.16; *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Joseph of Panephysis 7 (rendered from the Greek); the Exsultet (rendered from the Latin, *mutuati luminis detrimenta non novit*); John Paul II, *Mane nobiscum Domine* (2004); M. Kähler, *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus* (1892). Newman, "Christ Manifested in Remembrance" and "The Individuality of the Soul" (*Parochial and Plain Sermons* IV.17, IV.6); "Lead, Kindly Light" (1833). H. F. Lyte, "Abide with Me" (1847). Scripture in the Authorized Version, save where the Greek or Hebrew is given more literally (Lk 24:17, 21; Ps 1:1; Mt 5:3). A personal reflection, offered as food for thought; not teaching.

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