

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Gospel: John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

REFLECTION 1: REASON AND THE RISEN CHRIST

We live in a very sceptical world where it is often difficult to discern the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. For instance I once received a letter from the Netherlands telling me that I was the lucky winner of €50,000. The letter even enclosed a fancy looking cheque bearing my name on the pay line. As I looked closer, I noticed the words 'specimen only' and if I wanted the real thing I would have to disclose my bank details and I'd be lucky if I was entered in a lottery along with millions of others.

As we are aware we live to find out the truth of things in our world by experiencing things with our senses, reasoning in our minds or by believing them in our hearts. We acquire most of our knowledge by believing what others tell us. For example few of us have travelled all over the world, so the only way we can know about most countries is by what others tell us – we trust people who have been there. If they tell us about China and that their people are this and that, we believe them. Now, what is true of the way we acquire regular knowledge is even truer of the way we acquire religious knowledge. Most of our religious knowledge comes to us by believing what the Scriptures tell us. In other words most of our religious knowledge comes by believing.

Now consider this. Can we acquire religious knowledge by the same ways we acquire regular knowledge? Can we know that Jesus rose from the dead, not just by believing what Scripture says but also by reasoning? I believe we can. We know that after the death of Jesus his disciples were distraught, they were a defeated group of people, completely discouraged and frightened. Then on Easter Sunday something happened to those distraught and scared people – something transformed them in the most remarkable way imaginable – something changed them in an amazing way. Suddenly they literally exploded with joy and happiness – they couldn't contain themselves. Off they went to tell everyone they met that Jesus was risen and alive. So convinced were they about this that they readily suffered the most terrible kinds of persecution and even death, rather than deny their risen Lord. The lives and preaching of this handful of people changed the course of human history. No acceptable reasoning has ever been given to explain their transformed lives – no explanation but their own – they had seen Jesus alive. Had these unlearned disciples of Jesus lied about him and his resurrection, it is

reasonable to assume that sooner or later one of them would have confessed under pressure of persecution or death.

But none did. Their witness to the risen Jesus never wavered, never weakened. On the contrary, it got stronger and more powerful. They even experienced an amazing new power that allowed them to work miracles. It is this unexplained transformation of the followers of Jesus that leads some people to say that reason itself testifies to the resurrection of Jesus. In other words pure logical reason dictates that something spectacular happened at Easter to transform the followers of Jesus – pure logical reason dictates that the resurrection of Jesus really happened. We can't place our hand in the side of Jesus as Thomas did and experience at first hand Jesus' resurrection from the dead. But we can place our trust in the testimony of Scripture. But we can do more. We can use God's gift of reason to confirm what Scripture tells us. We too then can fall down on our knees as Thomas did and say to Jesus, 'My Lord and my God'. And Jesus will say to us, 'How happy are those who believe without seeing me'.

REFLECTION 2: THE ABSENT DISCIPLE

In today's Gospel, the disciples were afraid for their lives. They knew that Jesus had been crucified, and they feared the same fate, so they huddled behind locked doors. Then, to their wonder, Jesus appeared in their midst and his first word to them was, 'Peace'. Facing death is terrifying, especially for those who have no hope of resurrection. We are all going to die; there is no escape. As Christians we can face death with confidence and without fear. The opening prayer of Christian funerals assures us: 'For those who believe in your love, death is not the end'. Jesus enters the locked room of our fears and brings us peace.

Today's Gospel is familiar to us, so we might try to look at it with fresh eyes by following Thomas' journey from doubt and disbelief, to faith in Jesus – 'My Lord and my God'. The Evangelist tells us that Thomas was not present when Jesus first appeared. So, we may very well ask, where was he? Why was he absent? He wasn't there when Jesus breathed forth his Spirit on his own. He didn't understand, his faith was shaken, having nothing to hold onto but his doubt. We too, at times, are absent Thomases, we are absent from sufficient knowledge of our faith, because we are not steeped in our tradition as we should be. While we may be up-to-date on current affairs, having the latest iPhone and proficient in our job skills, we may have fallen behind in enriching our faith and the rich traditions of our church. How then can we engage in the great work of evangelization today if our religious education ended in Primary School? Our religious formation must be continuous; it is a cradle to grave process.

Had they been left to their own devices; the disciples may have remained silent and fearful behind closed doors. But Jesus came to them, wished them peace and breathed the new life of the Spirit into them. This same Jesus comes to us, breathing the new life of the Spirit into us, enabling us to overcome our doubts and fears so as to witness to the Gospel. We for our part are to receive that Spirit and cultivate its presence in our lives. Like Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, we are to be wise, and sit at the feet of Jesus, listening to him and taking his words to heart. We are privileged to avail ourselves of the rich resources offered in the scriptures, as well as other worthy publications and prayer and study groups sponsored by our parish.

Thomas has another valuable lesson to impart to all who struggle to believe. A week later, when he was with the disciples, Jesus invited him to touch his wounds and believe. Thomas recognised the risen Jesus and made a profound declaration of faith - 'My Lord and my God'. He had experienced the resurrection. We who also know and believe Jesus-risen are to offer that same experience to others – resurrection happens whenever love transforms life, when someone offers forgiveness despite a burning desire for vengeance; when a nation begins to value and protect the rights of all, where the poor and homeless are attended as brothers and sisters and refugees not left to drown but welcomed as children of God. Resurrection happens when enemies sit down together to talk instead of planning

each other's demise. Resurrection is happening all around us so let us venture out of our locked doors and celebrate. Jesus our Lord and our God lives.