

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

THE MERCY OF JESUS

Jn. 20:19-31

Today is Divine Mercy Sunday and today's Gospel demonstrates the mercy of Jesus. John tells us that the Apostles were behind locked doors in the upper room for 'fear of the Jews'. Could they also have been behind locked doors for another fear, the fear of facing Jesus?

There was now solid evidence that Jesus was alive. The women had told Peter and John that the tomb was empty and that an angel had told them that He had risen. Peter and John had rushed to the tomb to verify the evidence given them by the women. The tomb was most definitely empty and Jesus must have risen from the dead. They could be certain that He was soon to pay them a visit. John was the only one who had shown loyalty and friendship to Jesus. The rest had deserted Him. After the way they had treated their Lord how were they going to face Him? They, who were His trusted friends, had failed Him miserably when He needed them most. They ran away like frightened children. They had been so afraid and terrified to support Him or to acknowledge that they were His followers.

They were painfully ashamed of their cowardice and were fearful of encountering an angry Master. Locking themselves in a room showed their awkward immaturity. They were like boys who had broken a window and were awaiting punishment from their father.

When Jesus appeared how would they react, what would they say? If they really thought they were going to be reprimanded it meant that in the three years they had been with Him they had not really known Him. So much of His teaching had been about forgiving your enemies, not seven times, but seventy times seven. Surely, if they were truly sorry, they should have known He would forgive them, just as they had seen Him forgive many others? Christ did not stand up for His rights. He silently endured all the injustices hurled at Him and loved every one of His enemies. He did not show anger when He was insulted, but blessed these who cursed Him. He did not reject the man who betrayed Him, but called him 'friend'. On the Cross He did not call for His murderer's destruction, but forgave them their sins.

Whoever studies the life of Christ will understand that He is a merciful and forgiving God.

What a surprise the Apostles must have got when they saw Jesus' appearance through the locked doors. He would have looked at each one of them kindly. His first words were 'Peace be with you!' That must have put them at ease. He then showed them the wounds in His hands, feet and side. Although His body was glorified and could no longer suffer any pain, He wanted to retain the wounds made by the nails and spear. They were to prove to the world His tokens of love for us. There could now be no doubting that this was Jesus and that He had truly risen from the dead. John tells us that 'at the sight of the Lord the disciples rejoiced.' Jesus could see what the words, "Peace be with you" meant to them that He repeated it a second time. Those words told them that they had been forgiven. All that fear that had filled their hearts was in vain. Jesus then told His

Apostles that they were to do for others what he had done for them. They were to be merciful and harbour no grudges.

The two lessons we can take away from today's Gospel are to be at peace and be forgiving. If Jesus was to take revenge on His Apostles this would have been the ideal time and place, but that thought did not enter His mind. As followers of Christ we are not only expected to retell the forgiveness of Jesus but we must demonstrate it in our personal conduct by loving our enemies who have hurt us or been unfaithful to us and have abandoned us in our times of need.

When we have been hurt it is so easy to find good reasons for seeking 'sweet revenge' against our enemies. We would find taking revenge satisfying, but that would not be following Jesus' example. We would lack spiritual maturity. Jesus invites us like Him to rise above our old hurts and to love everyone. Anyone who believes in the Crucified Christ understands why God our Father did not demand His rights from us. In His amazing love He placed all our sins on His beloved Son. His Son's matchless sacrifice reconciled God's enemies to Him.

Anyone who comes to Christ by faith is filled with His gentle forgiving spirit. Jesus will enable us to forgive all who do anything wrong to us, just as He has forgiven us. We will learn to forget the injuries we have suffered even as God has blotted out our sins from His memory. So, let us forgive our enemies today. Then we will pray for those who hate us, love those who curse us, and ask our heavenly Father to fill our enemies with grace and bring about reconciliation.

Lord Jesus, may we will live according to Your Word, "Be merciful even as your Father is merciful." Your Apostle St. James has something wonderful to say about those who show mercy, "There is no judgment for those who are merciful." In other words, the merciful will walk straight into Heaven!

DO WE SHOW THE MERCY OF JESUS IN OUR LIVES?

Jn. 20:19-31

Saint John tells us that the Apostles were behind locked doors in the upper room for "fear of the Jews". Could they also have been there because of another fear - the fear of Jesus? There was now solid evidence that Jesus was alive. An angel had told the women that He had risen. They conveyed this message to Peter and John and immediately they rushed to the tomb to see for themselves and they found it empty. They were certain that He was soon to pay them a visit.

But John was the only one of the Apostles who had shown loyalty to Jesus. The rest had deserted Him. After the way they had treated their Lord how were they going to face Him? They, who were His trusted friends, had failed Him miserably when He needed them most. They ran away too afraid to support Him or to acknowledge that they were His followers. They were painfully ashamed of their cowardice and were fearful of encountering an angry Master.

When Jesus appeared what would they say? Surely, if they were truly sorry, He would forgive them, just as they had seen Him forgive many others? Jesus did not stand up for His rights; instead, they had witnessed how He loved all His

enemies. He did not show anger when He was insulted, but blessed those who cursed Him. He did not reject the man who betrayed Him, but called him "Friend". On the Cross He did not call for His murderers' destruction, but forgave them their sins. Whoever studies the life of Christ carefully begins to understand that He is a merciful and forgiving God.

What a surprise the Apostles must have had when Jesus appeared among them despite the locked doors! He would have looked at each one of them kindly. His first words - "Peace be with you" - must have put them at ease. He then showed them the wounds in His hands, feet and side. Although His body was glorified and could no longer suffer any pain, He wanted to retain the wounds made by the nails and the spear. Now there could be no doubting that this was Jesus their Master and Friend and that He had truly risen from the dead.

John tells us that "at the sight of the Lord the disciples rejoiced" and Jesus repeated the greeting. Those words told them that they had been forgiven. All that fear that had filled their hearts was in vain. Jesus then told His Apostles that they were to do for others what He had done for them. Just as He had forgiven them their sins, they were to forgive others. They were to be merciful and harbour no grudges, no revenge.

The lesson in today's Gospel is that we should be at peace and be forgiving. As followers of Christ we are not only expected to retell the forgiveness of Jesus but we must demonstrate it in our personal conduct by loving our enemies, especially those in most need of it, those who have hurt us or been unfaithful to us and who have abandoned us in our times of need.

Jesus invites us like Him to rise above our old hurts and not to seek revenge. God our Father has spared us. He has been merciful by sending His Son to us, who were His 'enemies', to save us from our sins. If we believe in the Crucified Christ, we will understand why God did not demand His rights from us. Instead in His amazing love God our Father placed all our sins on His beloved Son, Who on Calvary made satisfaction for them. His matchless sacrifice reconciled us to His Father.

Anyone who comes to Christ by faith is filled with His gentle spirit and changed into the likeness of Christ, in righteousness, holiness and truth. Let us not hold back, but hurry to be united to Christ, and receive a new heart and a right spirit from Him. This will enable us to forgive all who do anything wrong to us, as He has forgiven us. We will learn to forget the injuries we have suffered even as God has blotted out our sins from His memory.

The Spirit of God will enable us to pardon anyone even as God has forgiven us. So, let us forgive our enemies today; let us not think of ourselves first, but how to follow the example of a forgiving God. Then we will pray for those who hate us, love those who curse us, and ask our heavenly Father to fill our enemies with grace and love and bring about their well-being.

Lord Jesus, You showed us mercy by forgiving us all our sins. Let us show mercy to all who have offended us and live according to Your word, "Be merciful even as your Father is merciful."

DOUBTS CAN HELP OUR FAITH TO GROW

Jn. 20: 19-29

Doubt is not the great enemy of faith that we sometimes think it is. Doubt is not the opposite of faith. In fact, doubt can be a friend to faith. Doubts and questions can actually help us grow as Christians just as Thomas did in today's Gospel.

We sometimes think doubt is the opposite of faith because we confuse it with UNBELIEF. Doubt is not unbelief. Unbelief is a stubborn refusal or unwillingness to believe. It is saying, "I WILL NOT believe." But doubt is being confused or unsure what to believe.

Unbelief is closed to believing. Doubt is open to believing. Unbelief is choosing NOT to believe. Doubt is choosing WHAT to believe. We can't avoid doubt. Everybody asks questions. Everybody has doubts.

All of us have times when we are confused about what we should believe. This has been true of every Christian, even the greatest ones, down through the centuries. If we read their lives, we will see how they struggled with doubts and questions.

In the matter of doubting we can take two examples from the Gospels, the priest Zachary and our blessed Lady. They both asked questions. When the archangel Gabriel told Zachary his old and barren wife was to have a baby he said, "How can I be sure of this?" When he asked that question, he did not believe. When Gabriel told Mary, "You are to conceive and bear a son," Mary asked the question, "But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?" Mary was not disbelieving the angel. All she wanted was clarification. Here faith in God was so strong that she was prepared to believe the impossible – that she could have a baby without a relationship with a man! Both Zachary and Mary asked questions, but the former's mind was closed and he did not believe; but Mary's mind was open to belief in a matter she did not understand.

Even Jesus questioned if His Father had abandoned Him when He cried out on the cross, "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken Me?"

Thomas had doubts and questions, and wasn't afraid to share them. I am sure that the other apostles had their doubts and questions. They were just not as open and honest about them as Thomas was. It's not wrong to have doubts and questions.

Not only does everybody have doubts, but everybody also has a certain degree of faith. Life is not possible without faith. Each morning we wake up in faith that we will wake up, that the world will still be here and the sun will still be shining. And each night we go to sleep in faith that, if it is God's will, we will make it through the night. Without faith we would have no meaningful relationships with other people. We have to trust, to believe in others in order to have friendships. Everybody has some degree of faith. This is elementary faith, the kind of faith that we all have to have in order to live.

The Bible talks about another kind of faith, a deliberate trust and dependence on God. It is the faith that God loves us, that He is with us always, and leads us to want to live a life pleasing to Him. This faith gives us a hunger and thirst for God, that is, a

desire to get to know Him better. So, doubts and questions can help us. If we let them, they will help us get closer to God.

Our faith is God's gift to us. Our doubt is part of being human. Part of being human is being limited in what we can know and understand. If we knew everything about everything, we would never doubt anything! As it is, we cannot truthfully say that we know EVERYTHING about ANYTHING!

Doubt is an expression of this limitedness, of our lack of complete knowledge. We certainly do not know everything about God. Some people think they do, but God is just too much for our limited minds.

There is a story told about the great St. Augustine. He was walking on the beach one day, struggling with his understanding of the mystery of the doctrine of the Trinity. How can there be one God and yet three Persons in one God? While grappling with this question he saw a little boy running to the ocean and filling up a sea shell with water, then taking it back and pouring it into a hole he had dug in the sand. "What are you doing my little man?" Augustine asked. The boy replied, "I am trying to put the vast ocean in this little hole!"

Trying to understand fully God is like trying to put the vast ocean in a little hole in the sand. God is beyond our comprehension. We doubt because we are limited. We don't understand everything. We don't know everything. Doubts challenge us to grow in our understanding and knowledge. I am sure that little boy's answer resulted in Augustine firmly believing in the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, namely, that there are three Persons in one God. Doubt is faith seeking to grow! FAITH can use DOUBT to nourish and strengthen itself.

Our doubts and questions are signs of our faith, indications that our faith really matters. Our doubts reveal how seriously we take our faith in God. Someone who doesn't care what they believe, isn't going to be bothered with doubts and questions. It is the Christian who has doubts and questions who will be stimulated to try to resolve those doubts and answer those questions. And in the process, they will grow.

Let us not be afraid that our doubts or questions will destroy our faith. They can only destroy a shallow, false faith. Christian faith is tough enough to withstand any doubt we may have. For two thousand years it has withstood every doubt and question hurled against it. I'd be surprised if we can doubt anything that has not been doubted before.

So, go ahead and ask, "Has Jesus risen from the dead?" "Is there really a God?" "Does it do any good to pray?" "Why should I go to church?" "If God is so good, then why is there so much evil in the world?" "Why do bad things happen to good people?" What does a man who died 2000 years ago have to do with me?" "Are science and religion opposed to each other?" Trying to solve our doubts will lead to a stronger faith, not a weaker one.

Lord Jesus, let us not be afraid of our doubts. When we examine them, we may find like Thomas, our doubts will bring us to believing that You have risen and You are our Lord and God.

GLORIOUS AND WOUNDED

Jn. 20:19-31

For three years eleven men had basked in the friendship of the greatest Teacher and Leader our world has ever known. They loved Him and He loved them. By the things He said and did He proved to them that He was not only an exceptional Person, but He was God. Who else but God could make the dead rise and forgive sins? But by the happenings of the last few days their lives had been turned upside down. This exceptional Person they had learned to love had been crucified, died and was buried.

They were now hiding behind locked doors, overwhelmed by fear. When He was captured, they had fled and not raised a finger to help Him. They were wracked with guilt and filled with regrets. They were thinking if only we had helped Him. They were full of mixed feelings, disillusioned, confused, bewildered, finding no hope to cling to. Now they were so afraid for themselves. If their Master had been killed there was every possibility that they too would suffer the same fate. They were so afraid of the darkness in which they found themselves. They were also afraid for the future. They had no idea what the future would bring. They wondered what direction their lives would take. They had no vision or control over their destiny.

So, here were these Apostles gathered behind locked doors. No matter what barriers they had set up Jesus got to them. There are times when we can find ourselves in a similar position like these Apostles. Yet no matter what barriers we erect, no matter how we cut ourselves off from the Lord, no matter how much we try to hide, no matter how unworthy or guilty or alienated or out of touch we might feel, Jesus gets past it all. He comes to us where we are at. What does Jesus do? He says, "Peace be with you." He whom they had abandoned says, "Peace be with you." Lest there be any doubt that they are forgiven, He greets them with the word "peace". That's a word we all need to hear; in fact, it's a word we cannot hear enough. The Church makes sure we hear it several times as we celebrate Mass; that's why we read it again and again as we make our way through the scriptures. Not only the word peace, but so much more: "Peace be with you. God-is-with-us. Do not fear. I am with you always. You are precious in my eyes and I love you. I love you with an everlasting love. Your sins are forgiven you. I will not leave you comfortless. I will not abandon you". It is as if He is holding a wounded, frightened child in His arms, giving that what he needs most. What would we say to a frightened child? "Don't be afraid. I am with you. I will protect you. I'm right here. I will be with you. I love you; I forgive you. Sshhh. Be at peace now. Everything is going to be all right." That is how our Jesus treats us when we sin.

Then what did Jesus do? He breathed on them. They understood what He was doing. He was breathing new life into them. Just like God at the beginning of creation breathed life into the earth to create our first parents. Now Jesus is breathing new life into these dead men.

He then says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." We can do nothing without Him.

He then tells them that He is sending them out to others. That must have shocked them. They were far from ready to go out on a mission. In fact, after Jesus appeared to them, they would lock the doors once again. But sometimes, when we encounter the risen Lord, He points out a direction for us that we don't feel up to. But that doesn't matter. When we unite ourselves with the risen Christ, a process is set in motion, a process which begins to transform us into something far beyond our imagining.

There is one last detail from today's Gospel that we need to ponder. Jesus showed them that His glorified body bore the wounds in His hands, feet and side. He retains these wounds precisely to remind us just how much He loves us and how He won our salvation over sin and death and opened for us the gates of Heaven.

When I was a boy, I remember being asked a question at school, "What are the five man-made things in Heaven?" The answer is, the wounds of Jesus. That is what the disciples needed to see. That is what Thomas asked to witness before he could believe. Not a vision of the glorified Christ, but the vision of the Christ wounded and transformed - which is also a vision of what we are called to become as well: wounded yet transformed. That process will continue throughout our earthly lives and even beyond the grave. That is why we, too, need to gaze upon our wounded, transformed God.

It tells us that Jesus knows and understands pain. Whatever pain we may suffer Jesus has experienced it to a greater degree. He was wounded because of our own sins, and yet still He comes to us, having triumphed over the punishment. When He comes to us, He speaks about forgiveness - the very forgiveness won by the wounds we contemplate. It is the sight of those wounds that makes God so real for us. We worship the risen, wounded Christ, and more often than not, especially during the most painful times of our lives, we cry out as the hymn said, "Deep in Thy wounds, Lord, hide and shelter me, so that I may never, never part from Thee." A glorious God is perhaps too much for us to wrap our minds around, but not a wounded yet glorious God. That is something we can grasp, not only with our understanding but with our own lived experience of life itself with its glories and with its pains.

Lord Jesus, You are risen, and You bear the wounds of a painful death that was victorious. You come and show Yourself to us, and speak words of encouragement not to give up the fight but to follow in Your footsteps. In our efforts to carry our cross behind You may we hear You say, "Peace be with you."