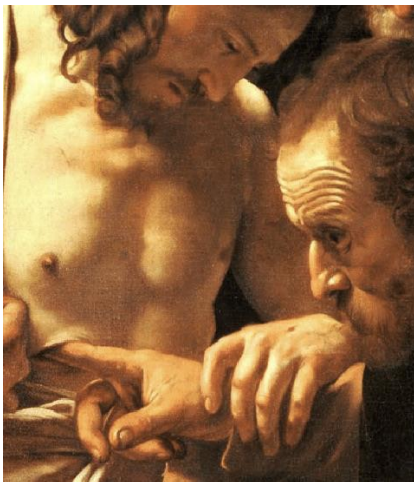


Second Sunday of Easter, 11 April 2021

Divine Mercy Sunday

Mass with Baptism and Confirmation, St Mark's Swindon



Gospel

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And 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 withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, 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 in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe."

Eight days later, His disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, 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; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, 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 believed."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.

Homily

'I will sing for ever of your mercy O Lord!'

Psalm 89.2

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The gospel reading we have just heard from St John shows us the Risen Jesus going in search of His own – God urgently wanting to find and restore to His friendship those who through failure and fear during His passion and crucifixion were lost in confusion and guilt.

Notice first that it's a gospel in two halves: two incidents, one week apart. First, Jesus appears on the night of Easter Day itself (Jn 20.19) to the disciples enclosed in the Upper Room; and then, because one of them, Thomas, was missing on that occasion, He showed himself to them *again* in the same place 'eight days later' (Jn 20.26). In these two stories, separated in time but connected in meaning, St John is teaching us what the other evangelists teach us through the parables of the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son, and the conversion of penitent thief on Golgotha – that God longs for, and searches for, finds and draws to himself, each single soul. No single soul is beyond God's initiative. [And that is what we shall affirm when at the moment of confirmation I shall greet each of our candidates by name – Allen, Nicky, Meisha – God has called *you* by name and made *you* His own. He has longed for you, searched for you, found you and is drawing you closer to himself.]

But I want you to notice something else, something easily missed if you are over-familiar with the story. What connects the two is that on *both* occasions – *both* on the day of the Resurrection *and* eight days later – our Blessed Lord showed the disciples the *signs* of His crucifixion (see Jn 20.20 as well as 27): those deep and abiding wounds, in His hands, and feet and side, clearly visible and tangible, carved into His glorified and mysteriously transformed Body.

Surely that is why Thomas says, 'Well, though you speak of the *wounds* you saw, I will not believe your report. *I* must see them, and touch them for myself.' And then when he *did* see them, he 'who was the last to believe, was the first to make the full confession of the divinity of the Risen Saviour'. Thomas went far beyond what the others may have said, for he who 'touched Christ as a man, believed in him as a God'. (Fulton Sheen: *The Life of Christ*, 1958).

On those two occasions it was *those wounds* – wounds He has never lost – that reminded the disciples *not only* of their failure and denial in the previous days and hours after the Last Supper; but *also* of their failure, throughout their time with Jesus, to understand – or even accept – His teaching, that He must suffer and die and on the third day rise again.

But that is not all. They were also the most persuasive testimony to the unconditional love for the whole of mankind which had been His motivation in giving-up His life to the power of sin and death, and proof of the greatest gift of the resurrection: His forgiveness, peace and new life.

In a word those wounds are the greatest testimony to God's *mercy*.

St John Paul II made a brilliant observation about this passage (*Dives in misericordia* 8): 'Here is the Son of God, who in His *own* resurrection experienced *mercy shown to Himself*, that is to say He experienced the love of the Father which is more powerful than sin and death. He who had been brought back to life is 'the definitive incarnation of God's mercy, its *living sign*'. He gives us all confidence that God's mercy in our lives is not something small, a means to an end, an optional extra for the devout among us. It is an *essential part* of the largest and smallest aspects of our faith and prayer.

2

But how can we best understand mercy? It seems illusive; and before we know it we are off on a tangent thinking of God's mercy in terms of *human* mercy – which seems to have to involve the one being merciful belittling and disempowering the one on the receiving end. But from the teaching and the behaviour of Jesus we can see that *divine* mercy isn't like that at all. So let me try to use the encounter with Thomas to say a little bit about why.

The Bible gives no arguments for the existence of God. It is a story of a *relationship*, a series of covenants with a particular people, with plenty of moments of crisis and conflict with God, anger toward him, doubts about His intentions, and a sense of lostness when there is no real sense of His presence. The catastrophic and traumatic experience of the passion and crucifixion of Jesus was a climax to such moments. Despite Jesus's clear teaching that the God of Israel never runs out of either love or liberty to renew His covenant, the disciples were 'slow to *believe*' the news of the resurrection. Thomas went further and refused to trust anything other than His own experience. Of course in part 'slow to *believe*' means 'slow to *understand*' what was happening – who wouldn't be? But rather more deeply it means they were 'slow to *trust*' what was

happening, because they knew, as never before, the abject failure of their love and discipleship toward Jesus in the hour of His greatest need. They knew their unworthiness and complicity. They were powerless, and they needed God to take the initiative – as He had repeatedly in the history of His people, the initiative that pours out of God simply because God is who Jesus Christ has revealed him to be – the initiative we call His *mercy*.

God IS the truth of His own nature; He IS Father Son and Holy Spirit; He IS an endless circulation of unconditional love and mutual justice and joy, which simply pours itself out on all that His love has created.

When that love reaches our sinful hearts and seeks entry we (who are not eternal and grow in faith only slowly) experience it in two ways: First we experience God's *truth*. God sees us for the sinners that we are, our weakness, evasion, instability and wrongdoing. To be seen by such an eye of truth hurts, it stings. God sees us; and we know all our fears, pretences and evasions are exposed and judged. Such exposure would be too hard to bear did we not also, in the same moment, experience God's *compassion*, the aspect of God's love that, even while we are exposed before God, makes the truth of our condition bearable and healable. As someone once said, 'truth makes genuine love possible; love makes real truth bearable'. Such is God's mercy and it is the way God converts and renews our hearts. Divine mercy is how we finally accept the true God, the living God who will not be fitted into my identity and preferences. God is as the Risen Christ has revealed him: living Truth too great for me to see, but who *sees*, and judges, me, and because of Jesus does not turn me away but increases His mercy in me, helping me to see myself and others with the same eye of truth and love.

3

Thomas was not a doubter; Thomas's problem was that he was not a *truster*! But when Jesus rebuked and challenged His unbelief, and bid him touch His wounds (not so he could forget the Cross but so as to make it unforgettable) divine mercy gushed forth from those wounds and Thomas saw and believed, and confessed the victory of divine love: 'My Lord and my God'.

In the Saviour's resurrection God's mercy, immense and free, has won victory over sin and death; evil will never be victorious again. Dear Friends, may we be bold enough to open our hearts wide to God and to drink deep of His mercy – both His truth and His compassion – so that that His victory may also live in us, and through us may enliven and feed the lives of others.

Prayer

God, merciful Father, in your Son Jesus Christ you have revealed your love and poured it out upon us in the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. We entrust to you today the destiny of the world and of every man and woman. Bend down to us sinners, heal our weakness, conquer all evil, and grant that all the peoples of the earth may experience your mercy, and find in you the source of hope.

Eternal Father, for the sake of the Passion and Resurrection of your Son:
have mercy on us and on the whole world!