

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER 2020

Reflection

Fr Tao Pham

First reading (Acts 2:42-47). This is the first of three summaries in Acts that describe the life and activities of the earliest Christian community. (The other two are 4:32-35; 5: 12-16). Here St Luke describes, in an idealised way, the final result of Peter's preaching at Pentecost. All those who received the word committed themselves to a new way of living centred on the teaching of the Apostles, fellowship, the breaking of bread (Eucharist), and prayer. The Church is necessarily a worshipping community. But this worship is related to loving service towards one another.

Second reading (1 Pet 1:3-9). Until the seventh Sunday of Easter inclusive, the Second Reading is taken from 1 Peter. Peter's aim is to encourage Christians, and help them to hold on the basic tenets of their faith in times of trial. In today's text the author thanks God for the new birth of baptism. However, the new life we receive at baptism is never quite perfected in this life. Our full sharing in the glory of Christ lies in the future, this hope not only enables the Christian to cope with trial and difficulties, but also to rejoice in them because he is sure that they will lead to salvation.

Gospel (Jn 20:19-310). Here we have John's version of Pentecost, birthday of the Church. The risen Jesus appears to his Apostles, shows them his wounds (which serve to identify him as the same one who died), and bestows peace on them. Then he inaugurates the mission he received from the Father (a mission accomplished by his death and resurrection): the reconciliation of people with the Father through the forgiveness of sins. To carry out their mission he gives the gift of the Spirit and the power to forgive sin. At three synoptic Gospels mention doubt when Jesus appears to his followers after the resurrection (Mt 28:17; Lk 24:37-38; Mk 16:14). But St John dramatises that doubt in an individual. Paradoxically, however, from the lips of this 'doubting Thomas' comes the highest profession of faith in all of the Gospels: ***'My Lord and my God.'***

Writing for a generation that has not 'see' the Lord, the Evangelist adds the comment: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.' He is telling these later disciples (and us) that they share the same blessedness as those who actually saw the risen Lord.

The modern believer, like Thomas, may at times think: 'If I could touch the wound prints on his hands, or see the pear mark in his side, then I would know for sure.' But were he to be put into a situation where that was possible, he would know at once that he could well be as sceptical about sight and touch as about sheer belief.

The story of Thomas makes plain to all believers that there is no advantage to the Apostle in 'seeing', because physical seeing can be as seriously questioned as any other experience of sense. The vision of Jesus as the Word of God incarnate is the gift of the Spirit both to those who 'see' certain things and to those who do not. The blessedness of belief applies to those who believe, not to those who includes Thomas as well as contemporary men and women, and contemporary men and women as well as Thomas.

Jesus said to Thomas: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.' The blessedness of those who believe runs right through the Gospel. We could say that it is the central theme of the Gospel. We are blessed because you and me who have not seen God and yet believe. Faith fills our lives with things without which they would have no ultimate meaning. Some people are born into a religious faith, and with the passage of the years find this faith increasingly strong and sustaining. To possess a faith like that is a tremendous blessing. But for others faith is a constant struggle. The latter will draw comfort from the story of Doubting Thomas. Some may be surprised to find a doubter

among the Apostles. They wonder why the editors didn't remove the story as likely to cause scandal. Fortunately for us they left it in. We need it. Incidentally, Thomas was not the only one of the Apostles who doubted. The Gospels show us that the other Apostles also had problems believing. This shows that the Apostles were like us, not supermen; they were human beings like us. Even though Thomas is not proposed as a model, he is a consolation to us in our doubts. And we can learn from him.

The Gospel tells us that, on Easter Sunday evening the Apostles were gathered in the Upper Room behind locked doors. They were wounded men. They were wounded, not in body, but in heart and in spirit. They were wounded individually by fear, doubt, guilt and grief. They were wounded collectively because one of their number, Judas, had killed himself. Like all people in pain, they had erected a barrier around themselves.

Jesus Christ's Resurrection fills Christians with hope. This hope is not merely a superficial and exaggerated optimism that is unconfirmed by facts. This hope is our trust in God. Good Friday is a day of darkness and death, the Holy Saturday that follows is also a day of emptiness and sadness. These two days are filled with suffering and disappointment, but Easter Sunday is a day filled with life and joy, like the dawn that is certain to come after the darkness of the night. Death, which is the ultimate enemy, has already been defeated.

As you know, today we are like the Apostles in the Gospel: We are wounded individually by fear, doubt, pain, and grief. We are living under the shadow of the Coronavirus pandemic and are in the middle of darkness. It is like experiencing Good Friday, a day for pain, sadness, fear and death. However Easter gives us the strength and faith to face all difficulties and the hope to triumph over all. This is because we know that every Good Friday is followed by an Easter Sunday, just as the dawn arrives after the darkness of the night. The good news is that we don't have to wait until death to experience resurrection but can experience the resurrected life during these difficult times.

We live in times of doubt. Christians are being killed and persecuted in many areas of the globe. Charges of fake news make us skeptical about the truth across all topics – culture, politics, science and religion. We live in a time of skepticism and doubt and what also appears as a time of little faith. In such an age of pessimism it could be easy to lose hope. However, we are encouraged to trust our faith, to be loyal to our faith and have the courage to continue on in our personal Christian journey. That is the model that Thomas gave us. In the gloom of dashed hope, doubt and skepticism he remained loyal and moved forward to bravely evangelize the faith. (1 Pet 2:24).

Jesus showed his wounds to Thomas. On seeing those wounds, Thomas' doubts vanished, and his faith was reborn. More marvelous still – through the wounds of Jesus, he and his fellow Apostles found healing for their own wounds.

The first Christians supported one another by praying and worshipping together, and by a loving service of one another. We live as members of a community of believers whose common faith strengthens the faith of each individual. Only faith can answer the most important questions of life. Faith is trust, not certainty.

The story of Doubting Thomas in the Gospel today brings home to us just how frail is the human container in which the gift of faith is carried. And it also shows us that Christian faith is essentially faith in a person who loves us – and has the wounds to prove it.

May the risen Lord bless all of you and the members in your families with courage and peace so that you may have an Easter season filled with joy and hope at the time of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Amen.

We pray and hope that the Pandemic will be over soon and then we will be able to gather physically in our faith community!

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