

Easter Sunday 2 – Sunday of the Divine Mercy

Jesus appears in the evening of Easter Day in the upper room - and then one week later. Jesus says each time, "Peace be with you." The apostles rejoice upon seeing his hands and feet which prove that it really is the Lord. The commissioning of the apostles is Jesus' first priority. The word apostle means "one who is sent", and the Holy Spirit is breathed on them to empower their mission, which is to declare the forgiveness of sins through the shed blood of Jesus. How intriguing that the Church's mission is forgiveness of sins, the Divine Mercy. The Sacraments of Baptism and of Penance are ways that this mission is extended into the world but by no means the only ones. Pope Francis clearly is trying to re-focus us for this priority. Those reconciled to God in Christ extend the mission further.

We gain an insight into the radical nature of the transformation in the believers after Pentecost from today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles: the believers were of "one heart and mind...had all things in common, witnessed to the resurrection...no one went without what he or she needed". The mercy of God was in evidence by how they treated each other. People sold their property and gave the proceeds to help their brothers and sisters in Christ. This was truly a family! These first Christians were accorded "great favor" among the general population in part because of how they loved each other.

In the second reading today, St. John explains how the love for the Father necessitates love for His Son – and then love for those in whom Christ dwells – the children of God. ("When you did it for the least of my brothers and sisters you did it to me!") When we love one another we are not just loving the human person but also loving Christ who lives within him or her. Which doesn't mean it is always easy! We love by "keeping the commandments" that Jesus gave us: to love God with all our heart, mind, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. To love as He loved us. John says this is not burdensome if we approach in faith, with the Holy Spirit empowering us! We learn more about love by hearing the Sacred Scriptures and the inspired teaching of the Church through the generations that comes from studying them.

Thomas meanwhile was not "breathed on" by Jesus and refuses to believe the other apostles when they report having seen the Lord. Thomas sets his terms for believing. He must see and then touch the very wounds of Jesus! Yet, a week

later, when Jesus invites Thomas to touch his wounds, Thomas answers – without touching Jesus apparently - “My Lord and my God!”. It would seem that Thomas too has received the breath of the Spirit! The growth or decrease of faith in Jesus is complex and unique. Each person must search and decide for themselves and not solely on someone else’s word or timetable. Jesus famously compares the Holy Spirit to the wind. When it comes to faith, the Spirit blows where it wills and not by our command. Our consent is required for mature, adult faith. The Christian life, the kind of love Jesus demonstrated, frankly involves often heroic sacrifices. This cannot be forced on anyone; it must be freely arrived at and freely embraced. You and I believe partly on the basis of others’ witness and partly through our own experience of the risen Christ in our lives – experimenting, testing, through our prayer. Thomas grows through his experience of the risen Lord: “My Lord and my God!”

My friends, we live in an atmosphere today that is often hostile to faith in Christ and rejects the need for God’s forgiveness. This puts us in an atmosphere strikingly like that in which the first Christian believers lived. They responded to the Holy Spirit’s prompting by loving each other in a way that was startling to the rest of their community. They embraced their mission of living and expressing God’s mercy, witnessing to those who showed interest, and relying more and more on the Holy Spirit’s empowerment. This is the blueprint for how the first Christians became a magnet for those seeking more. This too is our mission that we are called to embrace.