

## **Second Sunday of Easter April 08, 2018 Divine Mercy Sunday**

Readings: Acts 4, 32-35; 1 John 5, 1-6; John 20:19-31

The resurrection of Jesus was a new experience to the disciples. Even though Jesus had constantly explained to them about his rising from the dead, they were unable to grasp the implication of it. It was not something the disciples of Jesus seem to have anticipated, but now they were confronted with a novel experience of their master. The gospel narrative of today helps them to move from fear to joy, seclusion to mission, absence to presence, disbelief to faith, mere existence to new life. It tells how Jesus breathing on the disciples and giving them the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit they are into the second creation leading them into something even bigger, to be born again in Christ through Baptism. Jesus gives them peace and power to forgive sins. The forgiveness that Jesus speaks of is not just the juridical wiping away of sins but a deep reconciliation of people with God and with each other. In the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles tells us about the life in the early church which was centered round, the teaching of apostles, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. In the Second Reading from the First Letter of Peter we are reminded of the guarantees that come to us because of all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Christ's resurrection of Christ has won for us a new birth as sons and daughters of God. The church celebrates today the Divine Mercy Sunday, to experience the love and mercy of God given to us in Jesus.

Today's First Reading from the Acts of the Apostles makes reference to what it was like in the earliest days of the Catholic Church, immediately after the Resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Here we have the description of the manner in which the Christians worshipped in the early Church and everyone looked up to them. The believers who welcomed the message of Peter, the leader of the Apostles, received Baptism and were admitted into the Body of Christ. Once they became members of the Church, they wholeheartedly devoted themselves to learn and practice the teachings of the apostles which were the teachings of Jesus to his chosen group. Secondly, they worshipped in fellowship. They demonstrated their faith in Jesus by gathering together as believers during which time they prayed, they sang, they praised God, they witnessed to the work of the Holy Spirit. Thirdly, they participated in the breaking of bread or the Holy Eucharist done in memory of Jesus. The Eucharist is the central act of the community. Finally, they devoted themselves to prayers. There can be no Christian life without prayer as an essential element of each day. Over and above their worshipping, the believers sold their possessions and goods and distributed the proceeds to all according to their needs. The reading tells us that in those days, to build the Church, the Holy Spirit manifested many wonders and signs through the apostles.

In today's Second Reading Peter wants to enlighten the believers so that they may rejoice in the salvation and new life they have received from God in Jesus. He reminds of the guarantees that come to us because of all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ in whom we have a sure hope and a promise of an inheritance that can never be spoilt or soiled and never fade away. Our life, says Peter, is patterned in an unbelieving world on the death and resurrection of Jesus. God's saving action begins in a big way with new birth through Baptism. It is a new birth to hope, a hope which draws its life from what happened to Jesus in his rising from the dead. Our

rebirth is a birth to new inheritance and inheritance and we are reborn to salvation. He asks the Christian community to remember the many promises even though on the way we are likely to experience all kinds of trials. In the end, our great trust in God's Word will be rewarded. He stresses the importance of their faith as he says: "You did not see him, yet you loved him; and still without seeing him, you are already filled with a joy so glorious, that it cannot be described, because you believe; and you are sure of the end to which your faith looks forward, that is, the salvation of your souls."

John in today's Gospel reading provides us with an account of what Jesus did after His Resurrection. The passage begins by telling us that in the evening, on the day Jesus rose from the dead, he came and stood among his disciples as they had gathered behind the locked doors. They were still scared of the enemies in spite of receiving the good news of the master being alive and they sat huddled together in that house. They were collaborators with Jesus, who was executed as rabble rouser, and it was not impossible that they would meet a similar fate. Then, all of a sudden and totally unexpected, Jesus was there before them. In case there was any doubt about him, he showed them his hands and side which had been pierced with nails. He gave them the message of peace which on the one hand, a normal Jewish greeting of 'Shalom' and on the other the fulfillment of a promise made at the Last Supper. He had promised them peace which no one could take away from them whatever trials they might meet for being his followers. The presence of Jesus was the sign of peace. Their response was one of joy that Jesus was alive and was still with them. This also was the promise made at the Last Supper that in a little while they will see him no more, and then after a little while they will see him again and that they will rejoice and their joy no one will take away.

During his apparition to the disciples Jesus gave the mission telling them that just as the Father has sent him so is he sending them. Two things are being said here. Firstly, the mission that was given to Jesus by his Father is now being passed on to them. He was commissioning the Church through His disciples and their apostolic succession to perpetuate the work of Divine salvation that had been realized through His death and Resurrection. They are to do exactly the same work as Jesus did, proclaim the same message, announce the same vision. And they will do that by the way they live their lives as a group. It is essentially a corporate mission. Secondly, that mission is an essential part of their discipleship. They are called upon to live like Jesus and draw others to share their personal experience of knowing and loving Jesus and being loved by him. Now they have a mission to spread the love of Jesus, to form a community and to celebrate Eucharist. Jesus now confirms them in their mission. He breathes on them and gives them the Holy Spirit and also the power to forgive sins. They have the greater power to reconcile and the special task to bring them to Jesus. Certainly this power is more than the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This is the disciples' mission: to bring people together as brothers and sisters and children of one God. This is the goal of the Kingdom. They are to be filled with Spirit, the life of God. This is the significance of Jesus breathing on them. It is reminiscent of God breathing life into the mud of the earth and forming the first human being. Here there is a new creation.

When Jesus appeared to the disciples for the first time, only ten were present. We are told that, for some reason, one of the disciples, Thomas, was not present on this occasion. The reason is

not important. What is important is his encounter with the Risen Jesus. He refused to believe that the Lord was raised from the dead and was present among his companions. He wanted to see with his own eyes some irrefutable proof of his presence. Thomas personally wanted to encounter Jesus in order to believe in his resurrection. It is right that we ask the question at this juncture, whether Thomas was really a doubtful person or whether the other disciples were filled with doubts. At the outset it seems as if he was really a man of faith. When they told him that Jesus had risen and has appeared to them he was surprised that they could still remain in hiding. He was a courageous person and at the death of Lazarus, had openly said let us go with Jesus and die with him. He felt if they had really seen Jesus they would have been really shouting at the top of the voice telling the world that Jesus is living. Since they are hiding and were still scared of the Jews, he could not believe he has risen. In reality he was the man of faith. In his life he did just that. He went too far away India and died for his faith.

As we heard in the Gospel, Jesus appeared one week later also on a Sunday, and was with them once again wishing them Peace. Then he called Thomas and challenged him to put his finger in his wounds and hand into his side. The Scriptures do not tell us if Thomas ever needed to touch Jesus or not. What it tells us is that the eyes of Thomas were opened and made the expression of faith: "My Lord and my God!" The Resurrection of Jesus was the ultimate evidence that Thomas needed to prove to him that the friendship He had enjoyed with Jesus for the past three years was indeed a friendship with God incarnated in human form. At that moment, Thomas must have been overcome with awe and wonder. At the end of this event, Jesus appreciated Thomas for his faith in him once he had encountered him. But he said something more about his would be followers who would believe in him without visually encountering him. But it is through the preaching of the Word of God itself that the question of faith or disbelief is finalized. Faith in fact is to encounter God with the inner spiritual eye and to trust in him. And indeed from now on, these disciples too will only know Jesus by faith. But they will never lose the conviction that Jesus lives, that he is with them in all they do, that he is the source of their peace and joy through all their trials and tribulations.

We find three ideas in today's gospel: Spirit to Mission, Seeing to Believing and Not Seeing to Believing. First Jesus gives them Peace, not like the world gives but his own peace. Then he gives them the gift of the Spirit, which coming from the Father and who will teach them everything, and remind them of what Jesus had said. Then he breathes on them and gives them the mission to forgive and love and build the church. Second we have Thomas who saw and he believed. Jesus offers Thomas his very presence to see but what is significant is that Thomas confesses "My Lord and my God" apparently without placing his hands into Jesus' side. His faith is complete and total. Then the final stage it continues to those of us, those hundreds of thousands who have not seen Jesus and yet believed in him. This has been our faith of not seeing and yet believing. We are all included in such a standard and we have the faith in the risen Lord. The concluding words of John tell us more about the faith. Jesus did many others signs in the presence of His disciples, those not being recorded in the Holy Bible. What has been written is sufficient for us to believe that Jesus came on earth as the Messiah, the Son of God, so that through our believing we may have life in His Name. For it is in the Name of Jesus that we experience our new birth into a living hope, a hope that will never disappoint us.

Today is Divine Mercy Sunday, the Second Sunday of the Easter season. It was named by Pope John Paul II at the canonization of St. Maria Faustina on April 30, 2000, and then officially decreed by the Vatican. Divine Mercy Sunday can be seen as the convergence of all the mysteries and graces of Holy Week and Easter Week. The feast focuses the light of the Risen Christ into a radiant beam of merciful love and grace for the whole world. In his revelations to St. Faustina Jesus expressed His desire to celebrate this special feast. He says that the Feast of Mercy emerged from his very depths of tenderness and mankind will not have peace until it turns to the Fount of his Mercy. Jesus says that the divine floodgates through which grace flow are opened and let no soul fear to draw near to him, even though his sins be as scarlet because the Feast of Mercy emerged from the very depths of his tenderness. Today is the day when Pope John Paul II is going to be proclaimed blessed and receives the honour of the altar before a huge congregation in St Peter's Square, Rome.

A Pastor once travelling in a plane describes a beautiful episode. It was a long flight and there was the sign of a storm and all were asked to fasten their seat belts. Then, after a while, a calm voice of the Pilot said, "We shall not be serving the beverages at this time as we are expecting a little turbulence. Please be sure your seat belt is fastened." The Pastor looked around the aircraft to see many of the passengers were becoming apprehensive. Later, the voice of the announcer said, "We are so sorry that we are unable to serve the meal at this time. The turbulence is still ahead of us." And then the storm broke. The ominous cracks of thunder could be heard even above the roar of the engines. Lightning lit up the darkening skies, and within moments that great plane was like a cork tossed around on a celestial ocean. One moment the airplane was lifted on terrific currents of air; the next, it dropped as if it were about to crash. The pastor confessed that he shared the discomfort and fear of those around him. As he looked around the plane, he could see that nearly all the passengers were upset and alarmed and some started praying. Then he saw a girl to whom the storm meant nothing. She had tucked her feet beneath her as she sat on her seat and was reading a book. Everything within her small world was calm and orderly. Sometimes she closed her eyes, then she would read again; then she would straighten her legs, but worry and fear were not in her world. The plane finally reached its destination and all the passengers were hurrying to disembark, he lingered to speak to the girl whom he had watched for such a long time. Having commented about the storm and asked her why she had not been afraid. The sweet child replied, "Sir, my Dad is the pilot, and he is taking me home."

Fr. Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India