

# the Sunday Readings



*He said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe." (John 20:27-28)*

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter

### Divine Mercy Sunday

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## *Divine Mercy Sunday*<sup>1</sup>

### introduction

Divine Mercy Sunday is derived from the private revelations of St. Faustina Kowalska, which recommended a particular devotion to Our Lord's Divine Mercy. This theme links to the readings of this day. The Divine Mercy image depicts Jesus at the moment he appears to the disciples in the Upper Room after the Resurrection, when he empowers them to forgive or retain sins. This moment is recorded in today's gospel.<sup>2</sup> This reading includes the appearance of Jesus to the Apostle Thomas. This occurred on the eighth day after the Resurrection and so it is used on the liturgy eight days after Easter. It also refers back to the appearance of Jesus to the disciples on Easter evening, a week earlier, in which he empowered them to forgive or retain sins.

In the gospel we hear of a beatitude which affects us as modern disciples of Jesus, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe . . .*," because by faith we share in life: "*So that through believing you may have life!*"<sup>3</sup> Our faith in the Risen Jesus is translated into works which generate life. The account of John, clarifies that the resurrection does not impose itself as evidence and the Risen Jesus' appearances slowly impact on his disciples. Faith opens us all, to the risen presence of Jesus among his own.

### first reading: Acts 4 : 32 – 35<sup>4</sup>

[ the believers share their possessions ]

*Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.(32) With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.(33) There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.(34) They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.(35)*

The early Christian community at Jerusalem understood the commandment of Jesus to mean that his disciples were to be mutually dependent. There is a glimpse of this early in *the Book of Acts*: "*All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need*".<sup>5</sup> The community in Jerusalem seems to have institutionalised this egalitarianism by practising a communism of consumption.

1 Cover image: The Incredulity of Saint Thomas Caravaggio, 1603

2 *Jn.20:19-31* is the Gospel reading for this Sunday in all three yearly Sunday liturgical cycles.

3 *Ibid. v.31*

4 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

5 Cf. *Ac.2:44-45*

They shared the goods that they had acquired by private means. The author reports that they replaced, '*buying bread with money*', with, '*giving from what you have*'. Such actions made the use-value of what they possessed accessible to the less fortunate members of the community. They substituted an ethos of transforming social relationships, for a buy/sell mentality (vv.32-35).

But the first Christians didn't divest themselves of their wealth as if this action was a good in itself. They did so to raise the standard of living of needy members of the same community. The emphasis was on giving. Divestment was only a means to this end. All possessions were held in common in order that no one should go without. The '*handing over*' of material goods was real. By '*handing over*' their wealth in order to ensure the subsistence of others, the first Christians caused people to live in a concrete, physical sense. Equally, by stripping themselves of their own proper means of subsistence, they made themselves dependent on the community for their physical life. Such practises gave tangible expression of the mutual inter-dependence that is the essence of the new community based on Jesus' rule of neighbour-love.<sup>6</sup>

**response: Psalm 118: 1–2, 14–24<sup>7</sup>**

[ the song of victory continues ]

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever!(1)  
Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."(2) . . .  
The Lord is my strength and my might;  
he has become my salvation.(14)  
There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous:  
"The right hand of the Lord does valiantly;(15)  
the right hand of the Lord is exalted;  
the right hand of the Lord does valiantly."(16)  
I shall not die, but I shall live,  
and recount the deeds of the Lord.(17)  
The Lord has punished me severely,  
but he did not give me over to death.(18)  
Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
that I may enter through them  
and give thanks to the Lord.(19)  
This is the gate of the Lord;  
the righteous shall enter through it.(20)  
I thank you that you have answered me*

6 Ac.4:32-37 – is the second summary characterising the Jerusalem community. It emphasises the system of the distribution of goods and introduces Barnabas, who appears later in *Acts* as the friend and companion of Paul, and who, as noted here (v.37), endeared himself to the community by a donation of money through the sale of property. This sharing of material possessions continues a practise that Luke describes during the historical ministry of Jesus (*Lk.8:3*) and is in accord with the sayings of Jesus in Luke's gospel (cf *Lk.12:33; 16:9, 11, 13*).

7 *Ps.118* is a thanksgiving liturgy accompanying a victory procession of the king and the people into the temple precincts.

*and have become my salvation.(21)*  
*The stone that the builders rejected*  
*has become the chief cornerstone.(22)*  
*This is the Lord's doing;*  
*it is marvelous in our eyes.(23)*  
*This is the day that the Lord has made;*  
*let us rejoice and be glad in it.(24)*

Because of the alternative reality made possible by the gift of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, Christian communities can take up the prayer-form of praise and thanksgiving used in Israelite tradition. The backdrop to the speaker's song is a situation of need and trouble. But it is trouble that has been recently resolved by a life-giving action by the Lord God.<sup>8</sup> The speaker affirms that God indeed gives life in a world where death seemed to have the strongest sway.<sup>9</sup>

Believers, old and new, sing such songs because God hears and answers the cries of hurt and grief and resolves the trouble. The prayer expresses the speaker's confidence in the Lord's intervening, to give life. The song is not about the normal outcomes of trouble. It is about the decisive transformation made possible by this God, who causes new life where no life had seemed possible. Christians interpret the Easter events as continuing God's transforming action. The Lord took '*the rejected One*' (*Jesus*) and made him the foundation of the new structure. The earliest Christian preaching of the resurrection, found in *Ps.118* their community's interpretation of Jesus' practise.

**second reading: 1 John 5: 1 - 6**<sup>10</sup>

[ faith conquers the world; testimony concerning the Son of God ]

*Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child.(1) By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. (2) For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome,(3) for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.(4) Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?(5) This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.(6)*

8 [v.22] '*The stone the builders rejected*': is a proverb. What is insignificant to human beings has become great through divine election. '*The stone*' may originally have meant the foundation stone or capstone of the temple. The New Testament interpreted the verse as referring to the death and resurrection of Christ.

9 [v.20] '*The righteous shall enter*': the peoples' victory has shown that God favours them – they are '*just*' in the biblical sense.

10 [Jn.5:1-6] *Children of God* are identified not only by their love for others (see 1 Jn.4:7-9) and for God (1 Jn 5:1-2) but by their belief in the divine sonship of Jesus Christ. Faith, the acceptance of Jesus in his true character and the obedience in love to God's commands (v.3), is the source of the Christian's power in the world and conquers the world of evil (vv.4-5), even as Christ overcame the world (Cf. Jn.16:33).

By the end of the first century groups of presbyters were responsible for leadership in many Christian communities. The author, one such presbyter, is dealing with secessionists from his community. They are trying to influence and undermine the adherence of his followers. In this period, some drew a sharp line between *the spirit* and *the flesh*, or *body*; between *existence in the realm of revealed power*, and *existence in the realm of the physical world*. To prevent a false understanding of Jesus as Christ, the author insists that, faith in Christ and neighbour-love, must be kept together. Any form of belief in Christ that separates these in Christian practise, is mistaken (vv.1-4a).

The love of God is expressed in love of neighbour. The criterion of sincerity of one's love of God and the first of the commandments, to which one is committed by the love of God, is to love God's children. Faith defines love (vv.4b-5). The secessionist group were satisfied with belief, as the acceptance of something as true. In their case it was the acknowledgement that Jesus is the Son of God. But against their Gnostic tendencies the Johannine author insists that Jesus, the Christ, is the human fleshly Jesus. He can't be reduced to an idea or a disembodied spirit. Jesus came, '*not in water only but in water and blood*' (v.6a). The writer rejects the idea that Jesus, who is human and Earthly, is to be distinguished from Christ as God's Son, who is heavenly. Jesus' *baptism (by water)* is the descent of the Spirit on a human being. *On the cross (by blood)* the Spirit leaves, to return to God, while the human Jesus dies. According to the writer both *the baptism* and *the cross* are means by which the *Son of man* came in the form of '*the fleshly Jesus*'. The Spirit of God supports that with the testimony of those confessing Jesus as, '*Son of God*' (v.6b).

The writer reinforces the gospel by linking faith and neighbour-love. That link is characterised by Jesus' own practise. Jesus' significance must be down-to-Earth. Ethically, would-be disciples follow his practise by walking in his way – avoiding sin – as he was sinless – and acting justly, as Jesus acted justly. The author doesn't deny that through faith and baptism, a person receives God's eternal life. But developments in the practise of neighbour-love is needed, if the belief of the disciple is to be grounded in the real world. Rather than denying the main slogans of his opponents, the writer qualifies them, and seeks to show that his adversaries are not living out the implication of following the Christ. Faith for the author involves content as well as commitment. The images for Christ's life and death: '*water*', '*blood*' and '*Spirit*', assert that its in Jesus' practise that he is *the Son of God*. These three elements constitute an on-going testimony within and over against, '*the world*'.

**gospel reading: John 20 : 19 – 31**

[ Jesus appears to the disciples; Jesus and Thomas ]

*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews,*

*Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."(19) After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.(20) Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."(21) When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.(22) If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."(23) But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.(24) So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."(25) A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."(26) Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."(27) Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"(28) Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."(29) Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.(30) But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.(31)*

After Jesus was executed, his disciples were dispirited, fearful and in hiding (v.19a). According to John, on the first day of the week, the risen Jesus appeared to Mary of Magdala with a message to, "*go and tell the others*".<sup>11</sup> Mary did as the risen Jesus had commanded her. In the evening of the same day, Jesus came and stood among the disciples in the closed room and said: "*Peace be with you*" and, after saying this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were overjoyed at seeing Jesus and he said to them again; "*Peace, be with you. As the Father sent me, so am I sending you*" (vv.19b-21).

*Shalom* (peace) means much more than our word, 'peace'. It means not only an absence of war but harmony; the enjoyment of an abundance of material goods; and a freedom from all kinds of slavery. It had been announced by the Prophets that the Messiah would bring such a permanent peace – a united community – something similar to our 'communion'. 'Peace', 'joy' and 'freedom', were the characteristics of the time when God would intervene to bring harmony; not only to human life but even animals would be at peace among themselves and the whole universe would enjoy that true harmony and people would once again be at peace with God. The disciples are 'sent' (v.21).<sup>12</sup> Their task is to continue Jesus'

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Jn.20:17*

<sup>12</sup> [v.21] By means of this sending, the Eleven were made apostles, that is, 'those sent' (Cf. *Jn.17:18*). A solemn mission or 'sending' is also the subject of the post-resurrection appearances to the Eleven in *Mt.28:19; Lk.24:47; Mk.16:15*.

mission. The power of the living God animated Jesus' practise. Now that same power is to animate the practise of his disciples. There's a close link between their practise and *the giving of the Spirit*. "After saying this, Jesus breathed on them and said: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'" (vv.22-23). For John, this is the climax of the activity of the risen Jesus. The 'breathing' echoes Genesis; the creation scene where we are told: "Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground,[a] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. . . ."<sup>13</sup> John's gospel opens with the theme of creation. Now it concludes by returning to this theme.

The author is concerned about the new creation that wipes out evil. The Spirit of God consecrates people and gives them in their turn, the power to make others whole. This power to isolate, repel and negate evil and sin, is given to Jesus in his mission by 'the Living Lord'. And given in turn by Jesus, to those whom he sends. John doesn't tell us how this power is exercised, or who exercised it in the community for which he wrote. That he mentions this power, is evidence that it existed, and that it was exercised. The record of the appearances in John leaves us readers with a choice. Either we settle for the marvellous: Jesus the wonder-worker. Or the other choice, as dramatised in the story of Thomas; of penetrating beyond the signs to see what the signs reveal (vv.24-29). The disciples choose the second option. They believe that Jesus is, "Lord and God!" John recorded these appearances so that those who practise liberation (without seeing the risen Jesus) may also come to this high-point of faith.

As in the ending of Mark's gospel, not all has been said, and John's account is also open to a sequel (vv.30-31).<sup>14</sup> Signs were given by Jesus for the benefit of the Jews and then the disciples. John's account represents a commentary on the practise of those who had known Jesus at first-hand. We also believe in Jesus because we believe in the practise of those who knew John, who knew Jesus! We could say that the commentaries never end, because the gospel account has a sequel in our own practise.

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13 [v.22] This action recalls *Gn.2:7*, where God breathed on the first man and gave him life – just as Adam's life came from God, so now the disciples' new spiritual life comes from Jesus. Cf. the revivification of the dry bones in *Ezek.37*. This is the author's version of Pentecost.

14 [vv.30-31] These verses are clearly a conclusion to the gospel and express its purpose. While many manuscripts read, "come to believe," possibly implying a missionary purpose for John's gospel, a small number of quite early ones read, "continue to believe," suggesting that the audience consists of Christians whose faith is to be deepened by the book.

**for sharing:**<sup>15</sup>

- *The believers share their possessions. Comment on Acts 4 : 32 – 35*
- *Faith conquers the world; testimony concerning the Son of God. Comment on 1 John 5 : 1 – 6*
- *Jesus appears to the disciples; Jesus and Thomas. Comment on John 20 : 19 – 31*

**prayer:**<sup>16</sup>

*God of life, source of all faith,  
through the waters of baptism  
you have raised us up in Jesus and given us life that endures.  
Day by day refine our faith, that we who have not seen the Christ  
may truly confess him as our Lord and God  
and share the blessedness of those who believe.  
Grant this through Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
God for ever and ever. Amen.*

**the review:**<sup>17</sup>

*The call is to change our style of living as the early Christians in Jerusalem did by sharing possessions. As the author of the letter of John insists; faith in Christ and neighbour-love must keep together belief in Christ and Christian practise. As St. Faustina too insisted on living in the light of the Lord's Divine Mercy.*

*Those who want to live trusting in the promises of Jesus, are often made to feel they are a minority group doing something on the periphery of society. Ridicule, harassment, fear, bitterness, and discouragement, all make a strong case for simply walking away from the call.*

*The essence of God's nature and purpose, as revealed by Jesus, as the mercy of God, is to identify with the weak. While prayer, information and analysis are important, there's no substitute for personal involvement with people on the receiving end of injustice. For most of us, that means seeking ways to be alongside and available in some lively way. It means being open to be taught by victims. It means we be, open to receive gifts, rather than assuming we bring gifts.*

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15 Lectio Divina: reading God's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: *'In the presence of God, during a recollected reading of the text, it is good to ask, for example: 'Lord, what does this text say to me? What is it about my life that you want to change by this text? What troubles me about this text? Why am I not interested in this?' Or perhaps: 'What do I find pleasant in this text? What is it about this Word that moves me? What attracts me? Why does it attract me?'* From paragraph 153 The Joy of the Gospel – Pope Francis

16 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

17 The review: – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the Word and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.