

the Sunday Readings



**Then Jesus said to Thomas, “Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”
Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”
(John 20 : 27 – 28)**

2nd Sunday of Easter

Divine Mercy Sunday

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***“blessed those who have not seen
and yet have come to believe”***¹

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. 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.

first reading: Acts 5: 12 - 16²

[the apostles heal many]

Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico.(12) None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem.(13) Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women,(14) so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by.(15) A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.(16)

The reading from *Acts* links Jesus' announcement of God's reigning with the practise of his first disciples.³ The '*good news*' concerns not only what God has done in the past, through the earthly Jesus, but also what God continues to do in the spirit of *the risen Jesus* through his present-day disciples. The '*signs and miracles*' that accompanied the disciples' announcement on their daily visits to the temple in Jerusalem, evoke in their listeners, memories of the signs of the power of God to make things new. These signs are transformations parallel in scale with events like the birth that ended the long-standing barrenness of Sarah and

1 Cover image: *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* by Caravaggio, c. 1602

2 *The Book of Acts* focuses on the mission of Jesus' disciples beyond his absence from them. The conversion of Cornelius, a Gentile and '*a God-fearer*', Luke considers an event of great importance. The incident is again mentioned in *Ac.11:1-18*, where Peter is forced to justify his actions before the Jerusalem community and alluded to in *Ac.15:7-11* at the Jerusalem '*Council*' where Peter supports Paul's missionary activity among the Gentiles. The narrative concludes with Peter's presentation of the Christian kerygma (*Ac.11:4-43*) and a Pentecostal experience undergone by Cornelius' household preceding their reception of baptism (*Ac.11:44-48*).

Abraham. These *"signs and miracles"* match the interventions on behalf of the Moses Movement, that began the Lord's liberating exodus from Egypt. In Jeremiah and Deuteronomy the phrase *"signs and miracles"* indicated that the Lord's covenant with the Israelites people can't be relegated to the past! The narrative like the ongoing interpretations of the Abraham/Sarah and Exodus stories, shows a community regularly filled with power and regularly in tension with the authorities. The *"signs and miracles"* worked by Jesus' followers, are evidence that God's saving interventions are present through the practise of his apostles.

The signs and miracles worked by Peter and the apostles after Jesus' death/resurrection, reaffirm God's transforming *'now'* in relation to this new community. They show God's work of blessing on humankind's behalf, didn't end with Jesus' death and resurrection, but continues in the life of the first Christian community. This evidence of *"signs and miracles"* in the early Christian Movement affirmed the success of Jesus' apprenticing his disciples in his settled instincts and performance skills of obedient covenant-keeping. Healing was an important part of Jesus' practise. Luke emphasises this in his gospel account. There is an essential continuity between Jesus' practise and that of the new community.

response: Psalm 118 : 2 – 4, 16 – 17, 22 – 27

[a song of victory]

Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."(2)

Let the house of Aaron say,

"His steadfast love endures forever."(3)

Let those who fear the Lord say,

"His steadfast love endures forever."(4) . . .

*The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.(22)*

This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes.(23)

This is the day that the Lord has made;

let us rejoice and be glad in it.(24)

Save us, we beseech You, O Lord!

O Lord, we beseech You, give us success!(25)

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

We bless You from the house of the Lord.(26)

For the speaker of the psalm, the expression of gratitude is not something casual, but rather a dramatic public assertion of the source, trust and goal of one's life! The psalmist speaks of deliverance from distress. For the early Christian community, God worked a newness against all the evidence of hopelessness and all the data about the power of death. God shatters the known world, in order to establish new possibilities. Christians take the best Israelite expressions of this faith in God's power for life-giving and reaffirm it by repeating the psalm. Community experience bears out what the speaker affirms. Like the Israelites in

the past, the Christian community witnessed a transformed reality, because the Lord heard and answered the cry of *the hurting and grieving one* (Jesus) and came to his aid (raised him up). Christians interpret the Easter events as continuing the Lord God's transforming action. God took *the rejected one* (Jesus) and made him the foundation of the new community.

second reading: Revelation 1 : 9 – 13, 17 – 19

[a vision of Christ]

I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.(9) I was in the spirit on the Lord's day and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet(10) saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."(11) Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands,(12) and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest.(13) . . . , When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last,(17) and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.(18) Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this.(19).

It is the Spirit of Jesus that deepens our understanding of '*the signs*' so that the amazing interventions of the God of life, can be communicated to others in the written form of letters. The letter writer here provides a similar function to that of the ancient Israelite prophets. The first listeners/readers would have been struck by the difference the Seer notes, between the hearing a loud voice "*like the sound of a trumpet from behind,*" and experiencing a revelation, "*face-to-face from Jesus Christ!*" This parallels and contrasts "*hearing the voice;*" of John the Baptist and experiencing the direct presence of Jesus, described in the gospel accounts. The contrast illustrates two different prophetic moments which the Seer addresses in what follows in the letter.

The Seer is the human instrument who receives a revelation. At first, the voice is heard "*from behind*" but now it is a "*face-to-face*" encounter with *Jesus Christ (the Human one / Son of man)*! This is a reference to a revelation of Jesus Christ in a superior and final way. This vision is repeated in the final scenes in the book, which speak there of Jesus' permanent presence among the believers,³ and his direct communication with them.⁴ The two phases of revelation could refer to the two moments in the revelation of Jesus: the indirect revelation of the Israelite Scriptures and the direct revelation of the person and practice of Jesus himself.

3 Cf. *Rv.21:22-27 & 22:1-5*

4 Cf. *Rv.22:16-17*

There's a continuity in which one leads to the other. But there's still a distinction. The turning towards Jesus, could refer to the need for faith in him possible only through a conversion or turning around towards him. In the context of this discussion, the Seer's letters are really a reading of the ancient Scriptures done by Jesus himself. They explain their own significance in the light of his coming. The "*loud voice from behind*" calls for all the intermediaries of the old economy; the super-human intervention (*loud voice*); their human instrument (*the Seer/John*); the prophetic mission (*write a book*); and those for whom it is intended (*the Seven Churches*).

The vision of the human One is a direct communication. The communication is the same command. Jesus has to write what he sees. The passage is patterned on *Dn.10*, enriched with symbolic language from *Daniel 7*, *Exodus* and *Ezekiel*. '*The Human one*' (v.13) evokes *Dn.7:13* and many passages in the gospel traditions. In Daniel, the term refers to the end of time. Here it refers to Jesus. That means he is the Messiah announced by Daniel in his vision. The Seer is clear that Jesus Christ, *the Human one*, is of divine status. Jesus is a God-equal of the Lord God. The salvific action of the Human one is stressed. The phrase "*one like a Human one*" is used to indicate a divine presence among humankind in history. Jesus is the continuation and the perfection of the old economy. Above all, he has passed through death and this gives him power over death (v.18). The salvific action of *the Human one* is repeated here in another way; at the sight of *the Human one*, John "*fell at his feet as though dead.*" Jesus places his hand upon him and raises him⁵. This is taken from the Book of Daniel.⁶ But for Daniel, the restoration is after fear. Here it is after, "*as though dead*," which is the situation of humankind before the presence of the divine life and the transformation made possible by Jesus.

gospel reading: John 20 : 19 – 31

[Jesus appears to the disciples including 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

5 *Rv.1:17*

6 *Dn.10:9-12*

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)

Originally this passage was the end of the Gospel of John. Throughout his account, John weaves themes of blindness and seeing. Some 'see' – but they really don't. Some who are 'blind' come 'to see'! Some can pick up the signs, while others miss what's right under their noses. Jesus appeals to his practise as indicating his authority. But he also taunts his enemies, that the only sign they will get is that they will not kill him for good. The issue behind the signs is: 'What do we make of Jesus? Is he the chosen one of God, the hinge of history, the point to which erratic Israelite wanderings lead? Is he perhaps even more than all these things?'

On the evening of the week's first day, the day on which the tomb of Jesus had been discovered empty, Jesus appears to a group of disciples. Jesus appeared to Thomas exactly a week later, when the community had again assembled. This indicates that Sunday had early become the Christian, "Day of the Lord." The characteristic greeting of *the Risen Jesus* to his followers is, "Peace be with you;" a liturgical greeting rich in Israelite and early Christian tradition. Coming from *the Risen Jesus*, it expresses the new covenant's benefits. The report of the story of Thomas situates the incident during the week between the two Sunday assemblies. These assemblies link vv.26-29 with the first appearance. The account raises the important question of the grounds for belief in *the Risen Jesus*.

Thomas comes to faith during the assembly. Two points are emphasised. First, although *the Risen Jesus* has a mode of being that is unrelated to time and space (v.26), he is the same person who died on the cross (v.27). Second, with or without seeing, faith is absolutely required to confess God's presence in *the Risen Jesus* (vv.28-29). At one time, emphasis may have been on the reality of *the Risen Jesus*. In John's Gospel, however, the significance of *the Risen Jesus* had to be clarified. John wants to show the possibility of belief for those who had not shared in the early experience of the post-Easter community. The evangelist concludes with a statement about his intention to write an account of the practise of Jesus' apprenticing his disciples, for the benefit of later generations of disciples.

for sharing:⁷

- *A physician's cure is part of a broader 'healing' that the community of disciples is called to perform in the work of transformation and reconciliation. Christians must discover the signs of God's marvellous saving actions in everyday human life. Comment on Acts 5 : 12 – 16*
- *As Christians we continue to give historical expression to the life and mission of Jesus, whose history ended when he entered into glory. Comment on Revelation 1 : 9 – 13, 17 – 19*
- *The characteristic greeting of the Risen Lord, "Peace be with you," is the fundamental attitude of those who share his life. Comment on John 20 : 19 – 31*

prayer:⁸

*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 God and Saviour
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, now and always. Amen.*

7 Lectio Divina: reading God's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*.

8 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.

review:⁹

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.

Today is also Vocations Sunday in the Auckland Diocese. Bishop Steve asks us to support our seminarians studying towards their priestly vocations at Holy Cross Seminary. Your contribution will positively influence the future of the Church here in Auckland. Donate at www.aucklandcatholic.org.nz/donate. Please continue to pray for our seminarians.

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⁹ Review of the Week – 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.