

the Sunday Readings



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"Peace be with you." (John 20:19)**

2nd Sunday Easter Season (a)
(Divine Mercy Sunday)

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introduction

Divine Mercy Sunday is derived from the private revelations of St. Faustina Kowalska, which recommended a particular devotion to the LORD's Divine Mercy. The well-known Divine Mercy image depicts Jesus at the moment he appears to the disciples in the Upper Room after the Resurrection, empowering them to forgive or retain sins. This moment is recorded in today's gospel.² The gospel reading includes the appearance of Jesus to the Apostle Thomas. This occurred on the eighth day after the Resurrection and so it is used in our liturgy today.

In the gospel we hear proclaimed a beatitude which affects us very deeply as modern disciples; *"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!"*³ Our faith in the Risen Jesus is to be 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 up to the risen presence of Jesus among his own.

first reading: **Acts 2 : 42 – 47** ⁴

[life among the believers]

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.(42) Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.(43) All who believed were together and had all things in common;(44) they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.(45) Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,(46) praising GOD and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the LORD added to their number those who were being saved.
(47)*

The reading witnesses to the central belief and identity of the Christian community. It is a community energized to live in new inclusive ways. The new life-style is practised in the midst of the world through living faithfully in Jesus' spirit/Spirit. Friends are, *"attracted to each other, accept each other, seek each*

1 Cover Image: Resurrection Appearance to the Disciples in the Upper Room – John 20:19ff.

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).

other's good, and share the enjoyment of a common life".⁵ The author in a summary of life in the first Christian community, finds these qualities characterise the earliest followers of Jesus. In their practise of *the good life, or life in the Spirit*, Jesus' disciples affirm the power and attractiveness of transformed living. They become the new body of Christ.

Membership of the Christian community, through a baptism linked with Jesus' resurrection, is not merely an escape from the death-oriented society around about. Christian baptism requires disciples to disengage from the assumptions and values of the dominant society and authorises another way for them to act in the world. Such a transformed community, shaped by the tradition of the apostles, practises the Eucharist regularly. It prayerfully submits it's life to GOD's purpose. Mutual trust among its members makes an alternative economics possible.

The use-value of property replaces it's commodity value. In such an economy, members have no need to be self-sufficient. They can share, *"from each according to their resources, to each according to their need"* (vv.44-45). They are free to do what Jesus did – to act with love, mercy and justice. In other words, disciples could perform world-transforming actions without fear or defensiveness before GOD and humankind. They are a free community, unafraid, powerful and attractive. They become the new body of Jesus. In his absence they re-present him at sharing bread with the needy and the telling about his practise.

The absence of Jesus and the continuing presence of the poor among them is a reminder of Jesus' words, *"The poor you will always have with you; me you will not always have with you"*.⁶ The essential character of the new body of Jesus is it's faithfulness to the teaching of the apostles, the sharing of goods, their union of hearts, prayer, and the breaking of bread, joy, and missionary witness.

response: Psalm 118 : 2 – 4, 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 marvelous in our eyes.(23)
This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.(24)*

5 Herbert McCabe O.P.– The Teaching of the Catholic Church no.196. Published by Darton, Longman & Todd

6 Jn.12:8

*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)
 The LORD is GOD, and he has given us light.
 Bind the festal procession with branches,
 up to the horns of the altar.(27)*

The psalm is a thanksgiving liturgy accompanying a victory procession of the king and the people into the temple precincts. After an invocation in the form of a litany (vv.1-4), the psalmist describes a dialogue at the temple gates, between the priests and the speaker as the latter enters to offer the thanksgiving sacrifice (vv.19-25). Finally, the priests impart their blessing (vv.26-27) and the speaker expresses gratitude in a public assertion of the source, trust and goal of life.

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 this psalm. Community experience bears out what the speaker affirms. Like the Israelites in the past, the Christian community witnessed a transformed reality, because GOD 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: 1 Peter 1: 3 – 9

[a living hope]

Blessed be the GOD and Father of our LORD Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,(3) and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,(4) who are being protected by the power of GOD through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.(5) In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,(6) so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.(7) Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy,(8) for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.(9)

Hostility and further tests of faith threatened the cohesion and viability of the Christian household communities of Asia Minor. Peter's Letter sought to promote what was distinctive and valuable in these communities in order to encourage their unity among themselves and their commitment to the values and ideals of

the Christian movement. The link between the community's present faith and its future hopes is based on the resurrection of Jesus (v.3). GOD promises a good, joyous outcome as the future for faithfulness. The promised ending – *'in heaven', 'in the last times'* will not be spoiled.

Life as a Christian in the provinces of the Roman empire was hard. Faith required standing firm against popular opinion, with some risk and some persecution. Those addressed in the letter have not seen Jesus (v.8). Its like the post-Thomas situation, when faith is required beyond seeing.⁷ After Peter's suffering and martyrdom in Rome, the church the apostle left behind, now writes to the suffering Christians in Asia Minor. These faithful, troubled communities of Asia Minor are asked to trust in Jesus and the power of the resurrection, even though the visible presence of Jesus is no longer available. The letter reflects a vision of the church and a philosophy of the Christian movement, as a distinctive *'household'* or *'economy'* of GOD, within society at large.

gospel reading: John 20:19–31⁸ [Jesus appears to the disciples; to Thomas; the purpose of this book]

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)

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 Israeli 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

⁷ See *Jn.20:24-29*

⁸ *Jn. 20:1-31* The risen Jesus reveals his glory and confers the Spirit. This story fulfills the basic need for testimony to the resurrection. It is a series of separate stories.

appeared to Thomas exactly one 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.

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)

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.⁹ 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).

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)

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. And 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.

9 Jn. 20:19ff

for sharing:¹⁰

- *Life among the believers. Comment on Acts 2 : 42 – 47*
- *A living hope. Comment on 1 Peter 1 : 3 – 9*
- *Jesus appears to the disciples; then to Thomas; the purpose of this book. Comment on John 20 : 19 – 31*

prayer:¹¹

*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.*

review:¹²

We have gathered to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, along with Thomas, the doubter. We have prayed that our hearts be purified in the presence of the risen Jesus. Just as the first Christian community was of one heart and one soul in

10 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'*

11 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.

12 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.

believing, we must acknowledge that we often fall into dissent and dispute with the church today.

The apostles bore witness to the resurrection of Jesus with great power. We, on the other hand are full of reservations and reluctance to assimilate the spirit of Jesus. The Risen Jesus breathed a spirit of peace on his failing disciples. We, on our part, give up hope on a future peaceful world by failing to forgive others. May GOD who raised Jesus, show us mercy, fill our hearts with peace and bring us to life that lasts, through the victory over death of the risen Christ.

Christ offers disciples like us, a profoundly different understanding of our world, our neighbours and ourselves. And this new understanding authorises us to live differently in this new world of ours. The good news, on the threshold between our old failing world and the new reality that has come into being, is that we can host this new world with awe, respect and patience. It is a precious moment when the world-transforming, promise-keeping, mercy-offering, justice-demanding GOD, makes serious change in our lives, possible.

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