

## Second Sunday of Easter – Year C

The readings for this Sunday and the next few Sundays give us a picture of how the earliest Christians took in and reacted to the reality of Christ's resurrection. Luke's Acts of the Apostles traces the story of the first Jewish disciples carrying out their mission to spread the message of Jesus and winning over converts. John of Patmos, in the book of Revelation, shows us the growth of Christianity at the end of the first century.

**Acts 5:12-16** The Acts of the Apostles is Luke's second volume that takes up the story from the end of his gospel. His aim was to show how the earliest disciples of Jesus were successful in attracting people to faith in Christ. They came to refer to themselves as 'the people of the way' picking up the Hebrew idea that the way of the Lord is the only authentic way to spiritual growth and fulfilment.

Luke makes it clear that in these early days the disciples were Jews who saw that Jesus offered a genuine way to achieve the goals of Judaism. Their fellow Jews kept their distance because the religious leaders censured the Jesus people, putting it out that they were following a heretic. But they couldn't help being impressed by the healing and the unpretentious goodness that came from the disciples. In time, many fellow Jews were drawn to faith in Jesus and commitment to his teachings.

**Psalms 118** Everything about this psalm suggests a date after the exile in Babylon. The repeated refrains have the ring of responses made in a procession within the Temple precinct in Jerusalem. The refrain is translated as 'for his love is without end' or with similar variations, but the Hebrew spells out a more nuanced idea in a concise rhythm. The original is: *ki le-olam khasdo*, which actually means 'for his loving graciousness endures forever' and its repetition embeds the idea of God's unending graciousness in the minds of the singers. This is a perfect example of how music and rhythm can enhance prayer.

The connection with Jesus is the simile of the stone that was initially rejected by the builders but was seen, after all, to be critical as a cornerstone supporting the whole structure. Like so many of the ancient prophets, Jesus the unlikely one was rejected as unsuitable but turned out to be essential as a way to God.

**Revelation 1:9-13, 17-19** John, a 1<sup>st</sup> century church elder living on the Greek island of Patmos, wrote to his communities detailing revelations he had received and offering guidance and encouragement. We gather from his writings that Christian communities were experiencing hardship and even persecution for not paying respect or worship to the Roman emperor. We can sometimes misinterpret the situation of early Christians. It is not as if Rome was opposed to Christianity as such. After all, it tolerated a variety of religions. The problem was that Christians refused to venerate the emperors as divine and obedience to the imperial cult became a test of loyalty to the regime.

In these opening verses John is giving an account of the extraordinary experience he had of seeing Jesus in human form – like a son of man, an Aramaic expression for a human being. The affirmation from Jesus is that he is alive, risen from the dead. He was once dead but now is living. This is an explicit reference to his resurrection.

From a literary point of view we have here an obvious allusion to the vision in the book of Daniel of 'the one like a son of man' who will explain what is to take place in the future. In the case of John the figure will tell him what is to take place in the time ahead and John is commissioned with the task of writing down what he hears and sees.

**John 20:19-31** John's account of Jesus appearing to his disciples after his resurrection has a lot in common with the equivalent accounts in the Synoptic Gospels. Like Luke, who describes Jesus asking for and eating food, John is pointing to a physically recognisable Jesus. When he shows his hands and feet to the gathering he identifies himself. And yet he suddenly appeared to them in a room with closed doors. These are examples of the evangelist struggling to say that Jesus is not a ghost and neither does his body have the same physical properties as before. However, the reality is, he is the same Jesus risen from the dead.

Facing those who ran out on him just a little while before, Jesus offers them genuine peace – no recriminations, no disappointment. This is a deep peace that comes from assurance and closeness with the beloved – no reservations and nothing to prove.

## **This is a rebirth into a new life in Christ**

Breathing on the disciples is significant in Hebrew culture as breath has always been regarded as a manifestation of the human spirit. The symbolism here is that Jesus is passing on his spirit to his followers. It is an expression of unity through an exchange of life, as it were. The same Greek verb is used here that we find in Genesis when God breathes life into the first human being in the Garden of Eden. So, this is a rebirth into a new life in Christ.

Jesus' statement about forgiving or retaining sins is not primarily a reference to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The formal structure of the Sacrament developed much later, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In this gospel sin is mainly about rejecting Christ. The disciples will spread the word about Christ and people will choose to either accept or reject it. Here Jesus is using the language of the judge in Hebrew society whereby the judge declares who is 'bound' or 'loosed' from the charges brought against them.

Jesus had previously spoken about the role of the Paraclete which was to bring support and comfort to the disciples. Another aspect of the mission of the Paraclete was to lay bare or expose the sin of those who pass judgment on the Jesus people (John 16:7-11). Bearing in mind that the Johannine author is writing to a community that has been accused of heresy and expelled from the synagogue (most probably in the 90s or close to the year 100) we can see how the greater sin is the rejection of Jesus and his message. Those who refuse to accept what the disciples are offering will condemn themselves.

## **We have not seen but we believe and follow the way of Jesus**

The exchange between Jesus and Thomas is really directed at later generations of Christians and, of course, us. Faith that rests on hard evidence is not really faith. '*You believe because you can see me.*' Genuine faith is believing and trusting without seeing, without relying on hard evidence. And we are blessed for being in that category. We have not seen but we believe and follow the way of Jesus.

The writer finishes his work by declaring that his whole literary task was to present Jesus to his community and later readers in such a way that they would be convinced that Jesus is the Messiah who offers an authentic way to God. Walking this way, living out the values that Jesus taught, brings true life and fulfilment.

There is a profound message of relationship in this resurrection story, as there is in the other accounts. Thomas is an example of the person who needs evidence and without it he is accustomed to rushing to judgment. When we kick off with judgments we leave no room for openness – openness to understanding, openness to the new, openness to 'yes', openness to love. It takes humility to be open and to resist the need for certainty. The anxiety that grips the control freak is fed by the lust for certainty. 'Do it my way,' says Jesus, 'and you will find deep restful peace in your inmost being' (Matthew 11:29).



Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools suffers harm. Proverbs 13:20



Three newlywed men were having a drink together and bragging about how they had given jobs to their new wives.

The first man married a girl from Albania and he told her she was to do all the house cleaning and wash the dishes. He said it took a couple of days but by the third day he came home to see the house spotless and everything put away.

The second man married a Korean girl and he bragged that he had given her orders to do all the house cleaning, the dishes and do the cooking. He said it took a couple of days but by the third day the dishes and cleaning had been done and there was a fine meal ready on the table for him.

The third guy married an Australian girl and he boasted he had instructed her to do all the laundry, the cleaning, the dishes, mow the lawn and have a hot meal on the table every evening. He said the first day he didn't see anything, the second day he didn't see anything either, but on the third day most of the swelling had gone down and he could see a little out of his left eye.