

2nd Sunday of Easter - B (Divine Mercy Sunday)

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

On April 30, 2000, His Holiness John Paul II, in response to the wishes of the Christian faithful, declared that "the Second Sunday of Easter henceforth throughout the Church will also be called Divine Mercy Sunday." The desire for this celebration was expressed by Our Lord to Saint Faustina as can be found in her Diary (§ 699):

" . . . My daughter, tell the whole world about My inconceivable mercy. I desire that the Feast of Mercy be a refuge and shelter for all souls, and especially for poor sinners. On that day the very depths of My tender mercy are open. I pour out a whole ocean of graces upon those souls who approach the fount of My mercy. The soul that will go to Confession, and receive Holy Communion on this day shall obtain complete forgiveness of sins and punishment. . . "

1st Reading - Acts 4:32-35

During the Easter season there are no readings from the Old Testament (other than the responsorial psalm). It is during this season that we read from the Acts of the Apostles and learn how the early Christian Church conducted itself. To place today's reading into its proper context, we need to look back to Acts 2 where Peter addresses the crowd on that first Pentecost as he quotes from the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ *'It will come to pass in the last days,' God says, 'that I will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸ Indeed, upon my servants and my handmaids I will pour out a portion of my spirit in those days, and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹ And I will work wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below: blood, fire, and a cloud of smoke. ²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the coming of the great and splendid day of the Lord, ²¹ and it shall be that everyone shall be saved who calls on the name of the Lord.'* ²² *You who are Israelites, hear these words. Jesus the Nazorean was a man commended to you by God with mighty deeds, wonders, and signs, which God worked through him in your midst, as you yourselves know. ²³ This man, delivered up by the set plan and foreknowledge of God, you killed, using lawless men to crucify him. ²⁴ But God raised him up, releasing him from the throes of death, because it was impossible for him to be held by it.* (Acts 2:17-24). ⁴⁰ *He testified with many other arguments, and was exhorting them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.'* (Acts 2:40). Recall that Jesus had said *"Amen, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place"* (Matthew 24:34; Mark 13:30; Luke 21:32).

⁴² *They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. ⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's*

need. ⁴⁶ *Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart,* ⁴⁷ *praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”* (Acts 2:42-47).

³² The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common.

One of the marks of the Church is unity, not only in outward appearance but in belief as well. This has manifested itself here in joyful, self-sacrificing charity. This doesn't mean that individuals didn't own anything, it just means that they joyfully shared what they had.

³³ With great power the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great favor was accorded them all.

Again, part of Peter's address to the crowd on that first Christian Pentecost (Acts 2:24).

³⁴ There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them,

Again, the prophecy of Joel and Jesus' words are brought to mind. At this point in time, the entire Church is in Jerusalem – which is doomed to destruction because of the infidelity of the Chosen People of the Old Covenant. They, like all smart investors, sell their property in anticipation of the destruction and chaos which surely will come (and did come in A.D. 70).

bring the proceeds of the sale, ³⁵ and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need.

They did not presume to give their possession ostentatiously, but humbly give it to the Apostles to dispense as they see the need. By the time A.D. 70 came around, they had all apparently evacuated the city and resettled in the village of Pella in the mountains across the Jordan as there is no record of even one Christian perishing; although over a million Jews died in the siege of Jerusalem.

2nd Reading - 1 John 5:1-6

This first letter of John is believed to have been written from Ephesus toward the end of the first century (A.D. 67). In essence the letter deals with the love of God and of the brethren which are the hallmark of the Christian. Saint Jerome tells us that when John was a very old man his only message was, “little children, love one another.” When his disciples asked him why he was always saying the same thing he always answered “My children, this is what the Lord commands; if we do this, nothing else is necessary.”

^{5:1} Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten by God,

This is covenant imagery. If He is begotten, He is one of His own kind, from the same father. If you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one, your older brother, then you are also part of God's family.

and everyone who loves the father loves (also) the one begotten by him. ² In this way we know that we love the children of God when we love God and obey his commandments. ³ For the love of God is this, that we keep his commandments.

The sign of love is obedience to the commandments. If you truly love someone, you do what pleases them.

“The commandments of which John speaks are the two given by Jesus: Love God and love one another. Hold fast to this love and set your minds at rest. You need not be afraid of doing harm to anyone, for how can you harm the person you love? Love, and you cannot but do well.” [Saint Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 416), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Parthians* 10,7]

And his commandments are not burdensome,

When something is done out of love – rather than obligation – it is not a burden but a pleasure.

⁴ for whoever is begotten by God conquers the world. And the victory that conquers the world is our faith.

The Christian is possessed of the power to overcome all hostile forces that would prevent his obedience to God's commandments.

⁵ Who (indeed) is the victor over the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

The acceptance of Jesus in His true character (as Son of God) is the source of the power which the Christian possesses.

⁶ This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by water alone, but by water and blood.

He was proclaimed “Son of God” at the beginning of His public ministry in the baptism of John (Mark 1:11) and He accomplished His mission by His bloody sacrifice on the altar of the cross. Only through His sacrifice did Jesus become our savior.

“The Son of God came not by water only, in order to cleanse us from our sins, but also with the blood of His passion, by which He consecrates the sacrament of our baptism, giving His blood for us, redeeming us by His suffering and nourishing us with His sacraments so that we might be made fit for salvation.” [Saint Bede the Venerable (ca. A.D. 710), *On 1 John*]

The Spirit is the one that testifies, and the Spirit is truth.

The Spirit was present at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:10; John 1:32-34) and continues to witness to the work achieved through Christ by His presence in the Church (John 14:17).

The two verses which immediately follow today's second reading are known as the "Johannine Comma": "*So there are three that testify, the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and the three are of one accord*" (the King James Version says "the father, the word, and the Holy Ghost"). The Johannine Comma does not appear in Latin manuscripts of the New Testament prior to A.D. 800, and appears in only four Greek manuscripts, but these were late translations from the Latin. It is thought to have been a marginal note (a gloss) which was mistakenly included in later texts. John 19:30-34 says that Jesus gave up spirit (*pneuma*), blood and water.

Gospel - John 20:19-31

Saint John writes from the point of view of Jesus fulfilling Old Testament prophecies. He seeks to strengthen the faith of the early Church. In his account of the resurrected Lord, he shows how the necessary tools to continue His work were passed on.

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week,

The first Easter Sunday, the day Jesus rose from the dead. John wants to make it clear that this is the apostles' first encounter with the risen Christ. Every resurrection account which is dated in the New Testament occurs on a Sunday.

when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews,

After what had happened to Jesus, they feared for their own lives.

Jesus came and stood in their midst

Through the locked doors. This emphasizes the spiritual qualities of the resurrected body of Christ.

and said to them, "Peace be with you."

Shalom.

²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

Luke 24:39-40 mentions "hands and feet," based on Psalm 22:16 (Psalm 22:17 in the New American Bible. This demonstrates that the Risen One is the Crucified One. This answers the question of "Where have they put him?" (John 20:2).

²¹ (Jesus) said to them again, "Peace be with you.

Shalom. This is also a promised gift in John 14:27 “*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.*”

As the Father has sent me,

Jesus was sent by the Father to reconcile people with God and had the authority to forgive sins.

so I send you."

With the full authority of God. When you hear the bishop teaching, you hear God speaking.

²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them

The Baltimore Catechism defines a sacrament as “An outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace. This is an outward sign which is instituted by Jesus. In Genesis 1:2 and 2:7 God breathes order and life into His creation. This is what Jesus is doing here. In Acts 2:2 God energizes His Church.

and said to them, "Receive the holy Spirit.

Grace. This makes John 20:22 a sacrament in one verse.

²³ Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

This is the power given to the Church to continue the judicial character of Christ in the matter of sin. This is the origin of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, though it is equally true that the Church’s power over sin is also exercised in baptism and the preaching of the redemptive word. Notice that the apostles were not given the charism of clairvoyance – they must hear the sins if they are to know which to forgive and which to hold bound. This is the origin of auricular confession.

²⁴ Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve,

The designation “The Twelve” remains even though one of them had defected.

was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples said to 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 into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

Doubting Thomas. How many do not believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist because it fails the “duck test?”

²⁶ Now a week later

Again on a Sunday.

his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors

were locked,

Christ appears under the same circumstances as before.

and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then 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."

Again, a repeat of his previous appearance. Here, and in verse 20 is the only explicit evidence from the Bible that Jesus was nailed rather than tied to the cross. Luke 24:39 implies that His feet were also nailed.

²⁸ Thomas answered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Whether Thomas actually took Jesus up on His offer to probe the wounds is not stated but his response is the most complete affirmation of Christ's nature to be found on the lips of anyone in the gospel. The combination of "Lord" and "God" is found in the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) to translate the name of the God of Israel; it was also a combination used as a divine designation in the Greek world.

²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."

This blessing insists that all those Christians who have believed without physically seeing have a faith which is in no way different from that of the first disciples. Their faith is grounded in the presence of the Lord through the indwelling of the Spirit.

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of (his) disciples that are not written in this book.

Other than appearing in a room with locked doors, there are no "signs" in this reading. This has led some commentators to suggest that this verse was originally the conclusion to the collection of miracles used by the evangelist. In that context Jesus' resurrection would have been understood as the final "sign" of His relationship with the Father.

³¹ But these are written that you may (come to) believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.

This final verse summarizes the purpose of the gospel as having faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God as the source of eternal life. As Jesus said in John 6:29 "*The work of God is this: to believe in the one He has sent.*" If you trust in God and not yourself, then you will "do whatever He tells you" – no matter how bizarre it may seem: "You must eat my flesh and drink my blood."