

2nd Sunday of Easter - C (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 5:12-16

During the Easter season the Catholic and Lutheran lectionaries do not have an Old Testament reading, but instead have a reading from the Acts of the Apostles. The Episcopal lectionary offers a choice of a reading from the Acts of the Apostles or an Old Testament reading.

For our first reading today we hear that the apostles have begun to minister to the people in the same way that Jesus had done. They have found that they are empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring wholeness (health) to people in the name of Jesus. Immediately preceding today's reading is the dreadful Ananias and Sapphira event where a husband and wife sold a piece of property and brought only a portion of the proceeds to the apostles while telling them that all the proceeds were there. Peter confronts them, telling them that they have not lied to the Apostles, but to God and they are immediately struck dead.

¹² Many signs and wonders were done among the people at the hands of the apostles.

The miracles featuring Peter of Acts 3:1-11 and 5:1-11 are generalized as part of a routine performance by all apostles.

They were all together in Solomon's portico.

Solomon's porch. On the eastern side of the Temple. The Temple is identified as a place of meeting for the apostles in Acts 2:46.

¹³ None of the others dared to join them, but the people esteemed them.

Perhaps because of the Ananias and Sapphira event but it appears that the apostles had a “zone of Godly awe” surrounding them that kept outsiders from approaching on their own. This is in counterpoint to the adding which God was doing to their ranks in the next verse.

¹⁴ Yet more than ever, believers in the Lord, great numbers of men and women, were added to them. ¹⁵ Thus they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and mats so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on one or another of them.

Peter’s shadow has the same effect as the hem of Jesus’ garment (Mark 6:55-56) and Paul’s handkerchiefs (Acts 19:11-12). This is not magic but the power of faith in the Living God.

¹⁶ A large number of people from the towns in the vicinity of Jerusalem also gathered, bringing the sick and those disturbed by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

Not just those upon whom the shadow falls are cured.

2nd Reading - Revelation 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19

The Book of Revelation is a unique book in the New Testament in that it narrates extraordinary visions and auditions that concern things unseen and unheard by human beings. It is the only prophetic book in the New Testament. In the prologue of this book the author is referred to simply as God’s servant. He does not call himself an apostle or a disciple of Jesus. He does not even claim the title of prophet. He authorizes his message by describing its heavenly origin. The earliest Christian writer to comment on the authorship of Revelation is Saint Justin Martyr (ca. A.D. 160); he identifies the author as John, one of the apostles of Christ. Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 180-190) is the earliest writer to say that both Revelation and the fourth gospel were written by John, the disciple of the Lord.

The Book of Revelation is primarily a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in September of A.D. 70. This fact alone places Saint John’s authorship somewhere prior to this time. The passion, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord marked the end of the Old Covenant and the beginning of the New. The apostles were commissioned to deliver the message of Christ and, when this message had been delivered, God sent the Edomites and the Roman armies to destroy the last remaining images of the Old Covenant. The number forty, in Scripture and Hebrew numerology, is indicative of change. If Jesus was crucified in the year thirty then, forty years later, in the year seventy, the last images of the Old Covenant, the Temple and the Holy City, were removed; the Old Covenant has passed away and has been replaced by the New.

⁹ I, John, your brother, who share with you

John is closely related to the Christians.

the distress,

Physical and mental distress, sufferings related to the crisis of the beginning of the messianic time,

the end time.

the kingdom,

The messianic kingdom established by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Access to the kingdom is only obtained by means of trial (Acts 14:22).

and the endurance we have in Jesus,

In waiting for the glorious event of the entrance into the kingdom, patient endurance remains the specific virtue of the persecuted. Incorporated into Jesus' body by baptism, Christians share His passion, in order to participate in His glory (Romans 8:17; 1 Peter 4:13). New Testament doctrine, based on such Old Testament passages as Daniel 2:31-45 and 7:13-14, is that the Kingdom has arrived in the resurrection of Jesus (His First Coming). The dominion of God's people throughout the world will be the result of a progressive outworking of what Christ Himself has already accomplished. Saint John wants his readers to understand that they are in both the Great Tribulation and the Kingdom. In fact, they are in the Tribulation precisely because the Kingdom has come (Daniel 7:13-14). They are in a war, fighting for the Kingdom's victory (Daniel 7:21-22), and therefore need the endurance (perseverance) in Christ Jesus.

found myself on the island called Patmos because I proclaimed God's word and gave testimony to Jesus.

A rocky island of 16 square miles, situated some 50 miles southwest of Ephesus. Roman authorities occasionally banished individuals to such islands for threatening the public interest.

¹⁰ I was caught up in spirit on the Lord's day

Sunday, the day of Jesus' resurrection. The day when John, as Bishop, would be celebrating Mass with his people.

and heard behind me a voice as loud as a trumpet,

The trumpet blast (shofar) was a call to worship. Appearances of God were accompanied by this sound (Exodus 19:16,19). In early Christian literature it is often associated with the end time (Matthew 24:31; 1 Thessalonians 4:16).

^{11a} which said, "Write on a scroll what you see." ¹² Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and when I turned, I saw seven gold lampstands

The temple lamp, the menorah.

¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man,

In human form. The heavenly being in human form alludes to Daniel 7:13 where such a figure is

given dominion by God. Seen by Christians as Jesus, the Bread of Life.

wearing an ankle-length robe,

This is the official dress of the High Priest, whose clothing was a representation of the radiant image of God (Exodus 28:4; 29:5; 39:27-29; Leviticus 16:4; Zechariah 3:4).

with a gold sash around his chest.

Shows kingship (1 Maccabees 10:89). What we have is a priest-king like the one described in Daniel 10:5. A priest of the order of Melchizedek; a priest from the time prior to the golden calf. Notice what else we have: The temple lamp, and the Bread of Life. Compare this with Hebrews 9:2 where the earthly tabernacle is described: "in which were the lampstand, the table, and the bread of the presence." Saint John is looking into the heavenly tabernacle.

¹⁷ When I caught sight of him, I fell down at his feet as though dead.

The reaction of fear and prostration before an apparition of God or of a messenger of God is nearly an obligation (Genesis 32:30; Exodus 33:20). Man ought to disappear before the glory of God.

He touched me with his right hand

His sword hand; there is nothing to fear.

and said, "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last,

The Alpha and the Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet; everything is encompassed in Him. The Lord says of Himself in Isaiah 44:6 "I am the first and I am the last; there is no God but me" (see also Isaiah 48:12).

¹⁸ the one who lives.

As God alone is the truly living one (Deuteronomy 5:26; Joshua 3:10; Psalm 42:2; Jeremiah 10:10), Christ lives by the communication of the life of the father (John 5:6). He has been raised from the dead, never to die again; death is no longer master over Him (Romans 6:9).

Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever.

This contrast between the past and the present, between death and the life of the resurrection possessed forever, constitutes the core of the Christian creed.

I hold the keys to death and the netherworld.

The symbol of authority. The possession of these keys is a consequence of Christ's victory over the hostile forces. Death can no longer frighten the Christian. The Empire claimed to have all authority,

to possess the power over life and death, and over the grave; Jesus declares that He – and not the State, nor the emperor, nor Satan, nor the ruler of the synagogue – has command over all reality.

¹⁹ Write down, therefore, what you have seen, and what is happening, and what will happen afterwards.

This command is an elaboration of the commission given by the revealer to John in verse 11. It is a common formula describing prophecy.

Gospel - John 20:19-31

Having just heard of Jesus' appearance to John when he witnessed the heavenly liturgy, we now hear of Jesus' first appearance to the Apostles.

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 Apostle's first encounter with the risen Christ. Every resurrection account which is dated in the Gospels 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 lives as well.

Jesus came and stood in their midst

Through the locked doors. 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.

Demonstrates that the risen one is the crucified one. Answers the question of "where have they put him?".

The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ (Jesus) said to them again, "Peace be with you.

Shalom (again). 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 to reconcile people with God and had the authority to forgive sins in order to accomplish this reconciliation.

so I send you."

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

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

An outward sign which is instituted by Christ.

and said to them, "Receive the holy Spirit.

Grace. What we have just heard is a sacrament in one verse, according to the definition in the Baltimore Catechism: "An outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace."

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

This is the authority and responsibility given to the Church to continue the judicial character of Christ in the matter of sin. This is the origin of the sacrament of penance, though it is equally true that the Church's power over sin is also exercised in baptism and the preaching of the redemptive word. In order for these apostles to know which sins they are to forgive and those sins which they are to hold bound, they must hear them; Jesus did not give the charism of clairvoyance. This is the origin of auricular confession.

²⁴ Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve,

The designation remains even though one of them has 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 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, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you."

Christ appears under the same circumstances as before.

²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands,

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.

**and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe." 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 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 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 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 ("eat my flesh, drink my blood").