

APRIL 8, 2018

Sunday of Divine Mercy

Reading 1 ACTS 4:32-35

Responsorial Psalm PS 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24

R. (1) Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love is everlasting.

Reading 2 1 JN 5:1-6

Beloved:

Gospel JN 20:19-31

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 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." Now a week later 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." 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." Thomas answered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.

HOMILY:

Early African converts to Christianity were earnest and regular in private devotions and prayers. Each one reportedly had a separate spot in the thicket where he would pour out his heart to God. Over time the paths to these places became well worn. As a result, if one of these believers began to neglect prayer, it was soon apparent to the others. They would kindly remind the negligent one, "Brother, the grass grows on your path." [*Today in the Word*, June 29, 1992.]

In this story of early converts to our faith, we see on display a seemingly unavoidable part of the life of faith: ebbs and flows of enthusiasm in the practice of our faith. However, it's not quite right to suggest that "enthusiasm" ebbs and flows. For the word "enthusiasm" has its origin in the idea that the enthusiastic person is so energetic specifically because God moves his or her mind, heart, and will. Enthusiasm: The state of God in us. Can it really be that God retreats from us and causes us to lose vitality of the practice of our faith? Jesus himself made us a promise before his Ascension: "I will be with you until the end of time" (*cf.* Matthew 28:10). The Eucharistic Lord, ready to greet us and give himself to us here weekly is proof positive that the ebbing of our faith is not because we have lost *enthusiasm—God in us*.

Instead, on a positive note, today's gospel, we hear the following: "On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." In this, we get essential clues of how to maintain a strength and vitality in our faith life: 1) "On the . . . first day of the week. . ." 2) "The doors were locked . . . for fear of the Jews. . ." 3) "Jesus came and stood in their midst . . ." 4) "Peace be with you."

“On the . . . first day of the week. . .” In the text of the passage in its original Greek version, the word used for “the first day of the week” appears as a single word: *sabbaton*—the Sabbath. For the Jew, what was the sabbath? Above all, it was a day of rest, a time of recreation from the normal activities of life. It was a day to recall what God had done in creating the world, to reflect on what He continued to do in the world, and to ask Him to re-create us and restore us. And, in this scene, it was the day when, resting, the disciples who had lost their Lord to the crucifixion now found him—or rather were found by him.

“The doors were locked . . . for fear of the Jews. . .” Any mention of the Jews, particularly in the Gospel of John, must be handled with great delicacy! For, too often and with great sorrow, Christians and others have a history of scapegoating the Jewish people as if they are inherently evil. In the gospel of John, we can see the many mentions of the “Jews” as representing an opposition to the actions of Jesus. And, as the gospel is clear to say, these mentions of the “Jews” does not refer to all the Jewish people (the disciples and Jesus are all Jewish, after all!). Instead, the word means the Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus. These are the particular individuals who were agents of Jesus’ death and who, then understandably, caused fear in the disciples. This passage, however, is not primarily about the Jewish leaders. Instead, it specifies that the disciples “locked the doors” out of fear. For us, after we have found a sabbath place of rest at which, no longer distracted by our normal life’s activities, we can prayerfully await the Lord, we must at the same time “lock the doors” of fear. For us, this is an act of our will: that, when fears and doubts assail us, we choose to renounce them, literally to bar the doors between us and them, that they may have no power over us. And, they have no power over us because a greater power, the love of God, does come into our lives to force out all fear (*cf.* 1 John 4:18).

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Next, having found a place of rest and barring the door of their hearts to fear, we next hear “Jesus came and stood in their midst . . .” This is the certain promise of Jesus: if we take a place of rest and renounce fear, he will come to stand in our midst, in the midst of our hearts and lives. While at first this standing might sound like a physical posture, in the original biblical language, it is so much more. The word for “stand,” *estē*, suggests “taking a stand,” “standing firm,” or “standing steadfast.” The previous days of the way of the cross and the crucifixion of Jesus seemed, for the disciples, to be a defeat. And yet, now, on this first day of the week, after the disciples have locked the doors to their fears, Jesus comes, according to his promise, to stand resolutely and to take a stand as the One who remains their Lord and Savior.

And, finally, Jesus utters the word that each of our hearts longs to hear: “Peace be with you.” The word, “peace,” in the original biblical language (*eirene*), has the sense of joining all the pieces together in a whole. For our hearts, when they are not at peace, are fractured, scattered, and confused. On the other hand, the peaceful heart is a place undivided, un-scattered, and whole or, more specifically, wholly undivided and not in conflict with itself. For in this “peace” that only God can give, we no longer race around, trying to find peace, here and there and everywhere, but are given the peace for which we long, and can rest, wholly and securely in His love.

Has the grass begun to “grow on your path,” the path to your place of prayer where the living Lord will come to you and give you peace? It’s time to turn back and start again. Let’s follow the example of the disciples: let’s find a place of rest in the course of each day, a prayerful place of rest, and let’s choose to bar the doors of our hearts to any fear, because we know that, according to Jesus’ promises, he will remain with us until the end (*cf.* Matthew 28:20). Until we do, we will remain, not at peace, but fearful, doubting, and divided in our very selves. Isn’t it time for peace? We need a sabbath rest, we need to bar the doors to fear, we need the Lord to come and give us peace. Look, He’s right here, mercifully here.