

20150412SecondOfEasterSermon

Based on a sermon by John Kavanaugh, S. J.

We might think that today's Gospel reading is about Thomas's journey to belief but I would like to see it a Community that is being transformed.

People have often said to me that they wish that the Church today was like the Church in the book of Acts, where everyone was in agreement and everything went smoothly and everyone had what they needed. Certainly our Acts reading this morning presents a glowing picture of the early Christian community: one heart, one mind, no one claiming anything as his or her own. And because of this awesome behaviour between themselves, it became a witness to others who had great respect for them.

Some of the American commentators on this passage from Acts have a tough time trying to justify that this was **not** the first attempt at Communism or socialism. But through their community spirit, there were no needy in their midst, and each was provided for according to their needs. Perhaps they felt, in the words recorded in the First Letter of John, "we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

But if we go even earlier than the community described in the Book of Acts we find a different community; a community hidden behind locked doors, the community hiding in fear and this perhaps reveals that not all was sweetness and light. Locked doors are a sign of fear and fear is a sign of lack of faith.

In Revelation we are told: 'I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.' However the risen Jesus did not knock on the door of the house where the disciples were; he came and stood among them, unbidden, uninvited. So what was going on? Yes, they were fearful but what else had been discussed in that upper room?

Did you hear the first word attributed to the risen Lord as he enters that room - "peace." One can presume, then, that this community was somehow in a state of disquiet, and it seems that the reason was not only fear and terrible disappointment. Quite possibly it may have been divisiveness. They could have been asking each other what they should do next. Perhaps there had been lots of suggestions and they started taking sides about which one to follow. Then Jesus appears and it is forgiveness that Jesus next addresses: *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'*

What is it that is to be forgiven by the gift of the Spirit's breath?

Well, for starters, Scripture recounts that it happened that Thomas was absent when Jesus came. Later the community greets Thomas with the words, "We have seen the Lord." And he quite simply refuses to accept their testimony. '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.'

Whether this was a major source of division or not, it is evident that Thomas is the first Christian to dissent formally from a fundamental conviction of the gathered church. After all, he does not believe in their testimony to the Resurrection. Last Sunday I think both of us who preached mentioned how the resurrection was central to the Christian faith, yet here we have Thomas refusing to believe in this fundamental of faith.

Yet despite, up to that point refusing to believe in Jesus resurrection, despite the wound of this division, Thomas remains with the community and they seem to welcome him. In fact, the next time Jesus appears in their midst, a week later, Thomas is present. And Jesus speaks directly to him: "Do not doubt but believe."

How do you feel about this story as I've presented it. Perhaps you have never viewed as a divisive episode but simply as Thomas wanting proof before believing. So was that early Christian group in the upper room being forgiving towards Thomas? Even if forgiveness is not the theme of the Thomas incident, it is clearly the case that Thomas is there with the community he so profoundly challenges.

Does the church today learn anything from this episode? Doesn't the church lean strongly towards excluding from the category of believers those who seem to reject significant parts of our doctrine and practice? Type *Early*

Heresies in Google and see how just many hits you get. Wikipedia has a long list of these heresies where those who followed these heresies were excluded from the Early Church. And yet, the example of the resurrection community undermines such an attitude. **Thomas was not excluded.**

He was not kicked out or given an either-or choice concerning the Resurrection of Christ. He was welcomed. Apparently, he was forgiven, not bound, even though at the time he had not yet recanted his heresy.

Dare I suggest that the other disciples were also leaning in a heretical direction? They were tending towards Docetism – there a nice word to throw into the dinner party conversation. John as he wrote his Gospel was concerned that his community had docetic tendencies. Docetists are people who struggle with the physical nature of Jesus, preferring to see him as having only a divine nature. They aren't real comfortable with the idea that the Word of God would take on human flesh. When Thomas asks to touch Jesus' body, he shows that Jesus is not a ghost but is a material person. That is, Thomas helps to show that Jesus is not a communal hallucination but real and touchable. Therefore, even though John, the Gospel writer, is often seen as being the most explicit advocate of Jesus' divinity, in this scene we see him demonstrating that Jesus is also truly human – the Word made Flesh.

Can the Church learn from this episode on the way it handles those who struggle with certain doctrines? Unfortunately the Church has strong tendencies to exclude those on the margin. Is it fear? Is it seeking security by excluding anything that challenges us? How can we develop new understandings from God revealed through God's Spirit if we exclude all the time those who challenge us.

This text is saying something important to us all. Christians on both sides – liberal or conservative, act as if the presence of the other side is a contaminant in the church. There have been wars and persecutions mounted in the name of dogma. Indulgences and Justification by faith and sola scriptura of the Reformation period led to long wars in Europe. There have also been excommunications and interdicts in the name of right practice. Bishop Edward King of Lincoln and Fr Mackonichy of St Albans Holborn went to prison because they did what we do every week – having lighted candles on the altar and saying or sing the “Lamb of God who takes the sin of the world”.

Divisions have wounded the church and injured our witness in faith. In the Anglican Communion divisions have occurred over women priests, over changing of the Prayer book; over whether men and women in same-sex relationships should be ordained. I'm afraid to say that our passion for being right serves the cause of our own egos, at least as much as it has served the cause of Christ.

Does this mean that anything goes, - sounds like I'm back with my Lent course of sermons on Liberal Christianity - is there no cause or truth worth standing up for and making divisions over? Is it an invitation to the chaos of diversity without any middle-ground or unity? Not necessarily.

The risen Jesus returned to his community, why? The simple fact is that they were gathered together in his name. At least Thomas had not hardened himself to their testimony of seeing the Risen Christ. At least he had not put himself out of and above the church. He may have had the attitude of a dissenter, but it was in the context of Christ as the centre of their relationship. There is division, but there is also humility and openness.

Jesus says to the Thomas in us: 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.' Enter the wounds: the wounds of my humanity, of my church, of my crucified body, my risen body and my mystical body. And the reply of Thomas, the doubter, the unbeliever, the skeptic? In the strongest way possible Thomas acknowledges the divinity of Jesus, “My Lord and my God.” Such is the transformative power of resurrection faith.

Then John has a fascinating ending to this story “These have been recorded to help you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, so that through this faith you may have life in his name.” May these episodes help us believe. And forgive.

Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation: Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.