

DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY

April 8, 2018

First Reading – Acts 4:32-35

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 118

Second Reading – 1 John 5:1-6

Gospel – John 20:19-31

My dear people of God:

As we start our reflection today, please allow me to mention that our first reading is a part of the description of the life of the early Church. While it is true that we are still in the Easter season, our first reading already talks about the life of the church after the Pentecost, which in Liturgy is still several weeks away from today. Please stretch your imagination farther.

I pray that all of us, after hearing it, would go beyond merely appreciating the dramatic change of view towards life, whether individual or community life, that was experienced by the young Church after the Pentecost. That change surely started after Christ's resurrection and was energized by His ascension. And who would not want to change after what they heard from the preaching of the apostles?

I recall that while I was in grade school, there was always a slogan or a proverb written on top of the chalk board of our classroom. I love to recall two slogans: the first was: "*Hitch your wagon to a star*"; the second was: "*Aim high and hit the mark*"

Without any doubt, the first Christians hitched their wagon to a star; they aimed and hit the mark.

I pray that all of us would consider the new realization of the early church as a people in journey towards heaven. They viewed earthly possessions as non-contributory (sometimes, even barriers) towards becoming a community of believers sustained by a generous God who wanted them to aim higher and hit heaven. So too, must we.

The connection between the Death and Resurrection of Christ, His Ascension, and His Second Coming (which by the way, we profess every Sunday as the Mystery of Faith), gave the believers the new enthusiasm to reassess their view of life. Now, they were in for the long haul: HEAVEN, to where Jesus has gone ahead. I am praying that we, too, would reassess our concept of earthly possessions.

It is easy to conclude that for the believers, what the resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost offered to them was not only belief, but a firm CONVICTION that certainly THERE IS HEAVEN; and that JESUS IS COMING AGAIN AS HE SAID. A believer would have thought this way: "Since Jesus is coming again, I'd better be found worthy to enter His Kingdom,, and I'd better *practice community and fellowship* now.

Brothers and sisters, today's first reading gave birth to the terms that you always hear: kerygma, diakonia, koinonia, and parousia.

Kerygma would be the preaching; diakonia would be the serving; koinonia would be the fellowship progressively lived out and demonstrated by sharing; and parousia would be the eschatologically promised second coming of the Lord when He would gather His followers into His Kingdom.

But they also engaged in a radical resurrection practice not so popular today: *"Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common (koina)" (4:32).* Accordingly, as a result, *"there was not a needy person among them" in this power- and grace-filled resurrection community (4:34).*

How did Christ's resurrection motivate such a unified, generous community? How shall we live out our faith in the risen Christ today? Thanking the Lord would mean sharing our goods with those who need. After hearing that awesome first reading, it is so easy to relate ourselves with today's beautiful Responsorial Psalm which goes this way: *Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love is everlasting.*

Now, let us go to the Second Reading which we heard from the first letter of John, chapter 5, verses 1 to 6.

It is edifying to know that chapter 5 of the first letter of John to the early Christian community reminded them (and it reminds us now) that God's

commands are not burdensome and not difficult. In essence, His commands are invitations to love: to love others because we love God and to keep God's laws because we love Him.

John is also telling us that confessing that Jesus is the Son of God means believing that Jesus is the ONE who came through water and blood. The verse goes on to specify: "not in water only, *but in water and in blood*". Water and blood came out of Jesus' pierced side after His crucifixion (John 19:34). John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the Jordan with water.

Jesus did not simply appear to be human. He was truly flesh and blood. He was God's Son during His baptism and His ministry. He was God's Son when He accepted and suffered the full consequences of being human. He shared the whole human experience of living and dying. He remained God's Son even in His agonizing death on the cross. Jesus was born, baptized, and crucified to empower all of us to become God's children, cleansed by His blood. This is central to our faith.

True Christian faith is lived out not by mere doctrinal arguments no matter how persuasive, but by love. We believe in the Son of God who, rather than shedding the blood of others to prove that He was the Messiah, allowed His own blood to be shed. We gain victory not by inflicting suffering on others nor by avoiding pain at all costs but by allowing God to work within and through us even in our suffering. This is the victory to which we are called: loving God's children, and thus living our faith in the crucified, risen Son of God.

Now, let us go to the Gospel. We are dealing with the resurrection narrative and how the disciples reacted to the news of Christ's presence. Perhaps some of us would like to imagine what the disciples would do after they see Jesus among them this time. Remember, they were huddled behind locked doors. The evangelist John says that the doors were locked for fear of the Jews. Since the disciples themselves are Jews, of course, the statement cannot mean that they are afraid of Jews in general. Certainly they are afraid of the Jewish leaders who were behind the plot to kill Jesus. They are likely afraid for their own lives, afraid of their uncertain futures. That is why they locked the doors.

Jesus, however, will not be stopped by locked doors. He who is Himself the "door" of the sheep (10:7) comes right through those locked doors and appears in the midst of His frightened sheep. Perhaps there was a new fear that the disciples were feeling now. They may have been afraid that Jesus, now newly

risen from the dead, would confront them for having deserted and abandoned Him. Jesus came not to confront His disciples with their failures, but to grant them peace. His greeting, “Peace be with you,” carries the sense of the Hebrew greeting “shalom,” a blessing that connotes more than tranquility, but a deep and holistic sense of well-being -- the kind of peace the world cannot give (14:27).

Then Jesus showed His disciples His hands and His side, so that they can see that it is He, the real, flesh-and-blood, crucified Jesus - not a ghost or apparition - who was in their midst. The disciples responded by rejoicing in seeing the Lord, just as Jesus had told them that they would rejoice (16:22). Again Jesus pronounced a blessing of peace and told them, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

The disciples were commissioned to continue Jesus’ mission of revealing His Father to the world. They were assured that they will not be left on their own in this daunting task. Jesus had promised to send the Holy Spirit.

We are reminded of the creation story in the Book of Genesis, chapter 2, verse 7 when Yahweh breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of the first man, Adam. This time, Jesus breathed into His disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). *This Advocate or “Spirit of truth” will teach them, remind them of all that Jesus has said to them, and guide them into all truth* (14:26; 16:12-14). Then Jesus told His disciples, *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”* (John 20:23).

Brothers and sisters: please understand that “sin” is not just a transgression; it is fundamentally a refusal to embrace the fatherhood of God as taught by Jesus. Rejecting Jesus’ teaching becomes a sin and is tantamount to rejecting the Father.

Jesus is not giving His disciples some special power to decide whose sins will be forgiven and whose sins will not be forgiven. Interestingly, He is further specifying what it means to be sent, to make known His Father’s love to the world by His dying. As people come to know and abide in Jesus, due to the preaching of His disciples, such people will be “released” from their sins. If, however, those preachers sent by Jesus fail to bear witness, people will remain stuck in their unbelief; their sins will be “retained” or “held onto”. The stakes of this mission are very high indeed. The preachers of God’s love were assured of the help from the Holy Spirit.

For some reason (and the Bible does not tell us why), Thomas was absent and missed out on this first encounter with the risen Jesus. When told by the other disciples, he arrogantly displayed his incredulity. Perhaps he was afraid that if indeed Jesus rose from the dead, then Jesus might confront him for having deserted Him. Thomas may have echoed the other early fear of the rest. But Thomas may have needed more than just seeing Jesus and His wounds. He may have needed something that you and I sometimes need too, but we are just unsure of what it is. Now, we know what it is: the assurance of being forgiven. And we cover that need by our pride and arrogance. So, instead of pleading, we shout because we want to drown our fears. But this wonderful story tells us that Jesus showed up again one week later to provide exactly what Thomas needed. And Thomas responded with the highest Christological confession of anyone in the Gospel. His response is not simply a doctrinal confession, but a statement of trust and relationship: *“My Lord and my God!”* (20:28). All he needed was the privilege to touch the very PERSON who could forgive him.

My dear people of God: Jesus’ response to Thomas (20:29) may sound a rebuke at first hearing, but after reflecting on it, it is more of a blessing for all those who will come to believe without having had the benefit of a flesh-and-blood encounter with Jesus. Indeed, the evangelist John tells us that this is the very purpose of this book: *“But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in His name”* (John 20:30-31).

The section of the doubting Thomas can make us think of our commonality with the disciples in their fear and doubt. We are not totally different today from the apostles of long ago, even after we've heard -- just one week ago - that Jesus is risen from the grave. Fears and anxieties keep us locked in--as individuals and as a community. Those fears and anxieties keep us from fulfilling the mission for which Jesus has called and sent us.

The natural thing to do when we are feeling anxious or threatened is to hunker down and lock the doors, to become focused on our own security rather than the risky mission to which we are called. Jesus cannot be stopped by our locked doors. Jesus comes to us as He came to the first disciples, right in the midst of our fear, pain, doubt, and confusion. He comes bringing peace, breathing into our anxious lives the breath of the Holy Spirit. Jesus keeps coming back week after week among us; in the parish church, in the living word read and preached in our pulpits, in the bread, in the wine on our altars. Jesus does not

want us to miss out on the life and peace He alone can give. And He also keeps sending us out of our safe, locked rooms, into a world that, like us, so desperately needs His gifts of life and peace. Amen