

19.IV.2020 Second Sunday of Easter

Who couldn't sympathise at least a little with the initial reaction of the apostle Thomas to what began to be said about Jesus of Nazareth just a few days after his crucifixion and death, a gut reaction that has burdened him for two-thousand years with the moniker The Doubter, and has given rise to the rather hackneyed turn of phrase "a Doubting Thomas."

After all, Thomas hadn't been there that early Sunday morning when the pious women discovered the empty tomb and told Peter and John who then came to see for themselves. Nor had he been there a little later when Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene who first mistook him for a gardener and whose embrace He rebuffed. He hadn't been there either on the afternoon of that Sunday, when some disciples making their way to Emmaus recognized him at the Breaking of Bread in the stranger they had met who explained the Scriptures to them. Finally he hadn't been there the evening of that same Sunday, when the Lord appeared to the disciples who had met in the upper room where the previous Thursday he had held His Last Supper.

No wonder then that on the following Sunday, the one we read about in today's passage from the 20th chapter of the Gospel of John, when Thomas joined the other disciples who were again meeting in that same upper room, he refused to believe what they were telling him till he could see for himself, till he could test their claims by literally touching the evidence, by placing his hands in the wounds on the Lord's hands, feet and side.

Moreover, Thomas' scepticism is even to be commended rather than reproached. A questioning attitude to what we're told but is unaccompanied by some kind of verification is surely necessary in everyday matters. We'd be very foolish indeed to believe everything we're told just because we're told it. Gosh, imagine believing everything proposed by the mainstream media, let alone by social media. This of course also holds just as much in matters of religion. The critical use of reason ensures that we're clearly focused on what is truly deserving of the assent of faith. It ensures that we're not beguiled by the ramblings of an over-active imagination, and reassures us that we're indeed authentically persons of faith, and not merely gullible, credulous or superstitious.

What are we to make of Thomas then? How could his reaction have been so understandable in many ways and yet so disappointing? Just where did he get it wrong?

I suggest that a clue may be found in the opening phrases of our first reading today, taken from chapter 2 of the Book of Acts, where we're told about the earliest Christian community's unity in faith and good works as it witnessed to the teachings of the Apostles. Of course this report concerns the community after Pentecost and the descent of the Holy Spirit, but it's the same community some of whose members only a little earlier had witnessed the appearances of the Risen Lord and informed Thomas about them. Perhaps Thomas' failure was to not appreciate sufficiently the nature of the community of which he had been a member since he had been called to follow Him by the Lord Jesus, a community whose membership entailed adherence to its proclamation.

In a way we find ourselves in a similar situation to Thomas, for we too have not seen. Yet we do believe in the Resurrection because we are members of that same community of believers that traces the Good News she proclaims all the way back to the Lord's appearances to his disciples some two-thousand years ago. Even though the assent of faith is a very personal act, that has to be made by each one of us individually, it is always made in the context of the community of believers as a whole. Indeed it's not us as discrete individuals but the community as such that is the principal vehicle and bearer of faith. Recall and be consoled by the little prayer that we say between the Our Father and the Sign of Peace every time we pray the Mass: *look not on our sins but on the faith of your church.*

This Second Sunday of Easter is also known as "Sunday in White" (*Dominica in albis*) for it was on this Sunday that in the Early Church those who had been received into the Church on Easter Sunday took off their white baptismal garments. A fitting day to remember that even in this time of cautious isolation we're not really on our own, that we're not condemned to loneliness or imprisoned in solitude, for we're still spiritually enlivened and inspired by our unbreakable bond with the community of believers from which we received our faith in the Resurrection of the Lord and by which we are challenged to continue proclaiming it till the end of time. *Happy are they who have not seen and yet believed.* Happy are we who have not seen and yet believe!