

## GOSPEL

**John 20:19-31**

**In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them. He said to them, ‘Peace be with you’, and showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy when they saw the Lord, and he said to them again, ‘Peace be with you.**

**‘As the Father sent me,**

**so am I sending you.’**

**After saying this he breathed on them and said:**

**‘Receive the Holy Spirit.**

**For those whose sins you forgive,**

**they are forgiven;**

**for those whose sins you retain,**

**they are retained.’**

**Thomas, called the Twin, who was one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. When the disciples said, ‘We have seen the Lord’, he answered, ‘Unless I see the holes that the nails made in his hands and can put my finger into the holes they made, and unless I can put my hand into his side, I refuse to believe.’ Eight days later the disciples were in the house again and Thomas was with them. The doors were closed, but Jesus came in and stood among them. ‘Peace be with you’ he said. Then he spoke to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; look, here are my hands. Give me your hand; put it into my side. Doubt no longer but believe.’ Thomas replied, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Jesus said to him:**

**‘You believe because you can see me.**

**Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe.’**

**There were many other signs that Jesus worked and the disciples saw, but they are not recorded in this book. These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name.**

## HOMILY

It has been legitimately pondered by people in the past, ‘why was it that St Thomas wasn’t there with the disciples when the Lord appeared in their midst?’ One is tempted to suggest, in such times as these, that he was the designated member of the household sent out to get the groceries during a time of lockdown!

However, ill-fated attempts at humour aside, it is not mere idle speculation to ponder this question. Peripheral, perhaps; but not merely idle. The great Presbyterian Scripture Scholar, William Barclay, suggests with edifying charity that it was because Thomas, unlike the others, was fearless. It was Thomas who said earlier in the same Gospel, ‘let us also go, that we may die with him’ [Jesus] (Jn 11:16). Thomas may have been a pessimist and a doubter, but he lacked no courage. He alone was willing to go to Jerusalem and die with Jesus. He accepted the cross and embraced it. It would have been unlike him to be cowering in the confines of an upper room. It is hardly coincidental, then, that it was St Thomas who took the Gospel to the furthest ends of the known earth at that time – to India.

But it did not stop Thomas from being broken-hearted when the cross came - especially without his participation in it. Perhaps, like countless characters we have seen portrayed in literature, theatre and film, he just needed to be alone in his grief for a while. Sometimes, one needs to leave the group and face the inner anguish of one’s heart rather than the eyes of others. One wonders how many people cloistered together right now feel that need – be it for grief or, even, for gratitude: the need to be alone.

It is St Gregory the Great, however, who, commenting on this passage, probably sees the deeper reason (albeit unintended by Thomas) as to why Thomas wasn’t there: It was an act of Divine Providence. “In a marvelous way”, he says, “God’s mercy arranged that the disbelieving disciple, in touching the wounds of his master’s body, should heal our wounds of disbelief.” With full appreciation of its paradoxical nature, he continues, “The disbelief of Thomas has done more for our faith than the faith of the other disciples. As he touches Christ and is won over to belief, every doubt is cast aside and our faith is strengthened.” [Homily on the Gospels by St Gregory the Great, Pope].

Modern scriptural commentary would tend to agree with this 1400 year-old observation. At almost every turn in St John’s Gospel, the writer is looking beyond the characters and drama of the Gospel itself towards the reader. Not only does much of the earlier narrative flood back in as intertext to the passage (the promises of peace (14:27; 16:33); that they will be full of his joy (15:11); that they will be sent into the world as he was sent into the world (17:19), and so on), but that the reader (you and I) is being encouraged to see a greater and deeper joy than the mere ‘seeing’ of the Resurrected Lord by the disciples.

In a very real sense, we are being encouraged to consider ourselves not only as blessed as Thomas for seeing the Risen Lord but more blessed. For it is not in ‘seeing’ the Risen Lord, ultimately, that Thomas accepts the reality of the Resurrection; it is through the power of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the worshiping community, the Church, that Thomas is able to recognise Jesus as ‘his Lord and his God’. In the end, courageous as Thomas may have been, he made a mistake in being absent from the Church gathered on Easter Sunday. His faith was conditional. But those whose faith is unconditional and

remain with the Church are the ones who are ‘blessed who have not seen and yet believe’.

This is such a telling exclamation of the Lord. It lays bare the whole reason as to why St John’s Gospel is directed to the reader, the one beyond. Because that’s the way St John remembers the power of the Word of God in person. He always spoke and acted within a particular context but, in the light of the Resurrection, St John now realises that it was always universal in its intention.

That universal intention is us! Today, we tend to experience that universal intention, analogously, in the Real Presence of the Risen Lord in The Most Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist. We are right to! We are right to grapple with this dilemma as did St Thomas the Apostle standing before the Resurrected, physical Lord while proclaiming Him as ‘my Lord and my God’.

This is why another Thomas - St Thomas Aquinas - so astutely observed in his hymn to the eucharist: ‘seeing, touching, tasting, are in thee deceived. How says trusty hearing? That shall be believed; ... I am not like Thomas, wounds I cannot see, but can plainly call thee Lord and God as he” [translation of Fr Gerard Manley Hopkins SJ].

On this Second Sunday of Easter, let us remember that, as St Thomas the Apostle deliberately serves as an instrument within the Gospel to reach out to us, the reader, to believe in the Lord Jesus as our ‘Lord and our God’, so we too may, by the grace of the Risen Christ, be of witness to our brothers and sisters that the Lord has not abandoned us but remains always with us in The Blessed Sacrament. May our faith in this Divinely-revealed truth help others to believe that ‘Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God’, and that believing this, ‘they may have life through his name’.