

2nd Sunday of Easter (Year C): The Gift of faith in the risen Christ.
First Reading: Acts 5:12-16: the spectacular success of the infant Church;
Second Reading: Apoc. 1 (various verses): the vision of Jesus' glory;
Gospel: John 20:19-32: The famous story of 'doubting' Thomas.

I think it's safe to say that the Easter services went well in the group of churches in our partnership. For that, many thanks are due to all involved. However, this weekend's readings introduce a different note: the fact that faith in the risen Lord is not given to everyone, and that some feel aggrieved – even angry – that they 'miss out' on the general mood of rejoicing.

But let's not jump ahead too far! In the first reading (from Acts 5), we see the apostles having great results from their Jerusalem preaching – rather as Jesus had had, in his early ministry in Galilee – with “people crowding in from the towns round about”. Many miracles were accomplished, and (to use that ghastly modern phrase) the apostles ‘were on a roll’. They had a big, popular following, and so far, still thought of themselves as part of the Jewish religion. However, it should not have surprised them that the Chief Priest & other leaders in Jerusalem were already taking a dim view of their activities – especially their stressing Jesus' resurrection. But, for the moment, all was going well.

Move forward 60 or 70 years – long after the events in the first reading – and we read of someone's vision, in the Book of Apocalypse, or Revelation. Two things to mention first: (1) to a casual reader, the whole book may seem barmy – a series of characters and events that look like the result of a dose of psychedelic drugs; (2) the writer never says it is meant to be taken literally. He writes (verse 9) that he had the vision on the island of Patmos; he heard a voice (“like a trumpet”) telling him to write down what he saw. The language is very like that of later Old Testament ‘apocalyptic’ books, eg, Ezekiel & Daniel – deeply symbolic, unlike anything we use now. It's said to be the work of St John, but the style is not like his gospel or letters. What does come across is the age-old struggle of good against evil – a battle won by the crucified and risen “Lamb of God”, who is the “first & last”. He is the source of our human hope.

This optimism that good triumphs over human evil and despair does not come across in the gospel. Here, in one of the best-known stories of the New Testament, the famous “doubter”, Thomas, did not share the general happiness of the other apostles. (Please read it!) Before dealing with the actual event, it is worth saying that the resurrection stories in the four gospels present a rather mixed-up

set of experiences. In the stories of our Lord's passion & death, there is an agreed series of events, with which all readers will be familiar. This is not the case with the resurrection appearances of Jesus: they seem to be all over the place, from Jerusalem to Galilee, with some apostles and not others. (To me, that is the best argument for believing them!) This helps to explain this Sunday's gospel. Some apostles had experienced the risen Lord on Easter Day itself, and now believed he was alive. In St John's gospel, this was when he gave them the Holy Spirit, with authority to forgive sins. Thomas had not been there, and so refused to believe Jesus to be alive. He made the crude - even angry - remark that would not believe unless he inserted his fingers into the nail-holes, and his fist into the spear-hole in Jesus' side. It was tantamount to saying the whole idea was rubbish – the result of the others' wishful thinking.

A week later – ie, this Sunday – he was with them, when Jesus appeared. Pointedly, Jesus offered him the chance to do what he had asked, then he added, “Doubt no longer, but believe.” Thomas leapfrogged the simple belief that Jesus was alive, and worshipped him, calling him, “My Lord and my God”. The story does not end on a happy note; Jesus simply said to him: “You believe because you can see me. Happy (blessed) are those who have not seen, yet still believe.”

That, hopefully, is us: none of us has seen the risen Lord. Mind, we are in good company, as few people in Jerusalem that first Easter week saw him, either. What we, and Christians for the past 2000 years, have done is place our trust in the unshakeable faith of the apostles, as related in the New Testament. Those people did experience the risen Jesus physically, and went on to worship him as their “Lord and God”. We have not had their advantage of physical sight; that's why Jesus said our faith makes us “happy” or “blessed”.

St Thomas was not a ‘bad’ man; he simply represented an attitude of mind that is common now – “seeing is believing”. This is the default position of many in our society, so, personally, I am really glad St Thomas got there first and said what millions of others have thought down the centuries. As adults, we sometimes have to trust what people tell us; otherwise, relationships would be impossible. St Thomas could not do this with his fellow-apostles, and the result was this famous gospel story. There is a place for a critical view of parts of Holy Scripture (I've had to present it for decades!) but there comes a point when we must take some things on trust. That is true of Jesus' resurrection. The alternative: hatred, despair and death will have won.

Fr Jim Dunne.