

Second Sunday of Easter

Divine Mercy Sunday

April 28, 2019

Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass

of

St. Thomas More Catholic Parish

celebrated at

St. Joseph Catholic Church

116 Theodore St.

Scranton, PA 18508

John 20:19-31

Well before he expressed the doubts we heard about in today's Gospel, St. Thomas was full of bravado during Jesus' speech to His disciples about His sick friend, Lazarus. He indicated that He would go to Bethany to wake the dead man from sleep. Bethany is less than two miles from Jerusalem, and the disciples by then were well aware of the ruling authorities' hostility toward our Lord. To go so close to Jerusalem was sure to be trouble for Jesus. So St. Thomas said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Thomas, we know, did nothing of the sort. With all the other disciples, he fled the Garden of Gethsemane and left Jesus to die alone. By the time of our Lord's Passion and Death, St. Thomas's bravado had faded, and he was interested in saving his own skin. What explains this seeming change of heart, to go from one proclaiming his willingness to die with Jesus to one determined to save his own life?

The answer can be found in the Gospel today, where St. Thomas revealed two things about himself that only became clear under pressure. The first problem is that he did not live in solidarity with his fellow disciples. We note that the disciples stayed together after the Passion and Death of Jesus, so when He rose from the dead our Lord found them in one place. Thomas was not with them. While it is true that the disciples were living in fear, cowering behind locked doors, the only explanation for why Thomas was not there is that he had found an even better hiding place. The other ten might all be found and killed, but Thomas was going to save himself. After the first resurrection appearance to the assembled apostles, they had to go find Thomas to tell him the Good News.

This meeting is how we know Thomas was hiding out somewhere else, not indifferent to his fate or dutifully awaiting Jesus' return. When the disciples told Thomas, "We have seen the Lord," he uttered his most famous line, "I will not believe." He was so far off on his own that he would not stay with his fellow disciples, nor would he believe them when they all told him that Jesus had risen from the dead. His lack of faith had so completely destroyed his bonds to his fellow disciples that there was an absence of trust. It is clear from this account that of the eleven who remain faithful to Jesus, in the end St. Thomas comes closest to the desolation and despair of Judas Iscariot. Judas was already lost. Thomas was a hair's breadth away.

So what happened next is truly beautiful. Thomas had chosen to isolate himself, to find his own hiding place, to repudiate in an embarrassing way the bravado he had shown before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. But the disciples were not willing to write him off. Thomas was saved because his brother apostles reached out to him. For however fleeting a moment, they left the safety of their hiding place and found Thomas to tell him what they had seen. St. Thomas, who had boasted that his love was the greatest, that he would die with Jesus, turned out to be the one, besides Judas, who loved the least.

Not only that, he was the most in need of love, for the other apostles had each other. Thomas had chosen alienation for himself.

Thus, we should not associate any romance or honor with St. Thomas in his hour of doubt. It is foolish to call oneself a doubting Thomas, as if it were a badge of honor, because the practical implications of his profound doubt were that he would abandon all his closest friends, the very ones in front of whom he had been so macho. His doubt made him a bigger coward than the other ten, and it almost made him a traitor. Were it not for the love his friends showed him, inviting him back into the circle to which he belonged, he might have been another man after whom no one names his child. You've never met a Judas in your life. How close the Church came to the name Thomas having the same odiousness.

But thanks be to God, Thomas overcame his doubts and confessed Jesus to be his Lord and God. Just as importantly, the other apostles forgave Thomas just as Jesus had forgiven them. Clearly the disciples did not hold it against Thomas that he had not only doubted the words of Jesus Christ after these words came to fulfillment and the Good News was repeated to him, but he had distrusted the people he should have been most able to trust. The peace Jesus had offered to them the evening of Easter Sunday, the disciples in turn offered to Thomas that very week; so he was there when Jesus came again.

The temptation to abandon the doubter is strong. But there is a difference between someone like Thomas, who is weak and alone, and the people who are fixed in their opposition to Jesus Christ, avowed atheists and the like. Thomas doubted, certainly, but he also came over to the gathering with the other apostles when he was invited. His words, his strong words about his placing his fingers in the mark of the nails, make it seem as if he was implacable in his doubt; but his actions show us otherwise. He wanted it to be true, so he came along. True disbelievers won't accept your invitation.

Therefore, if you know someone who you think might be like Thomas, the answer is not to abandon him in his doubts. The merciful thing to do is reach out to him, try to include him back in the fold, give him another opportunity to meet our Risen Lord face to face. He may well say no, in which case the best thing to do is to stop wasting your time throwing pearls before swine. But in the name of love, the love the doubters don't yet know, we should at least give it a try.

The example we have in St. Thomas is of a man who turned it completely around. The compassion of his friends turned a near-Judas into a martyr for the Faith, a man who walked to the ends of the earth to bring Indians into the fold, Christians who to this day call themselves "Thomas Christians". Thomas started out as a man who wanted to impress others, who talked a big game with no substance to back it up. What he discovered is that even after he was exposed as a fraud, when he was the least impressive, he was still loved. At the heart of Divine Mercy is this truth, that we are loved not because of our Faith but in spite of our sin, and that in recognizing this generosity we finally become generous ourselves. So we should give the doubters another chance. It may be that we're inviting the next Thomas to sainthood.