

Homily for the Second Sunday of Easter, Year A (2020)

“What’s in a name?”, asks Juliet of her lover Romeo in Act 2 of Shakespeare’s famous tragedy. We might answer her question with “quite a lot, actually!”, as far as today is concerned. This is the Second Sunday of Easter. It’s also known as Low Sunday, perhaps to underline the distinction with the heights of Holy Week and the rich liturgies of the Triduum. Nowadays, that name is often replaced with another – Divine Mercy Sunday – following the institution of this feast by Pope John Paul II in the millennium year of 2000. So, three names already for today’s Mass. There is one more that we ought to consider, and it is just as significant as the previous one, if not more so, from a sacramental point of view. According to the tradition of the Church, today is known as ‘Domenica in albis’ (‘white Sunday’). Why? Well, the expression is meant to recall the rite of Baptism administered to those who became Christians and members of our community of faith at the Easter Vigil. Each candidate, or ‘neophyte’, would receive a *white* garment (*alba* in Latin), to indicate their new dignity as children of God. This is still done today. Infants are often given a small symbolic white garment. Babies who are baptised are usually dressed in a white christening gown, or wrapped in a white shawl. The priest or deacon presiding over the rite says the following words: “.. you have become a new creation, and have clothed yourself in Christ. See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity.” There it is. A new creation. An outer dignity as followers of Christ. Cleansed from the stain of original sin.

There is something of this in today’s readings at Mass. The disciples are shut away, behind locked doors, fearful for their own wellbeing. We might say that they are ‘self-isolating’ from the virus of the chief priests, scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, who comprise ‘the Jews’. From those authorities who felt threatened by the presence and teaching of Jesus, and who subsequently sought to rid themselves of him. Authorities whose infection was one of obsessively implementing a rigid legalism in all aspects of Jewish life, without the application of mercy and compassion.

Jesus clearly does not adhere to social distancing restrictions! Nothing can keep him apart from his disciples, and from us. He is the perfect antidote, able to pass through locked doors, hidden rooms, and fearful hearts. Jesus is the one who offers the soothing balm of mercy to his friends who had abandoned him when he needed them most. Hence, his first words are of reconciliation, of understanding, of forgiveness: “Peace be with you”. There is more. A further gift is offered to these astonished followers: the power to forgive sins, just as the Risen Christ has forgiven them.

Simon Peter knew all about that experience of forgiveness. In Friday’s Gospel, we heard John the Evangelist’s account of that moment when Peter recognises the Risen Christ on the banks of Lake Tiberias. St. John – whose gospel account is filled with sacramental imagery – tells us that Peter “tied his outer garment round him.. and threw himself into the sea.” Such is his desire to be with Jesus, to spend time with him, and to be reconciled.

There are clear baptismal overtones here. Peter enters the waters of Lake Tiberias, and emerges renewed, purified, cleansed. He is the one who is able to drag the net of 153 fish onto the shore. The net stands for the Church, and the multitude of fish as its universality. Peter the rock, the one to whom Jesus had bestowed the keys of the kingdom, is able to gather this great catch together. He has his outer garment of Christian dignity about him. He is the one to whom Jesus asks that fateful three-fold question: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” A direct, intimate question that strikes at the very heart of Peter, and cancels out his previous triple denial of Jesus in the courtyard of the home of Annas, the former high priest, and father-in-law of Caiaphas. It is hard to imagine a more poignant or intimate moment of reconciliation and mercy.

This is why Peter can declare the following words with utter certainty in our Second Reading today: “Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in his great mercy has given us a new birth as his sons, by raising Jesus Christ from the dead, so that we have a sure hope and the promise of an inheritance that can never be spoilt or soiled and never fade away”. This is the same inheritance that is promised to each of us. In these strange times, we find ourselves huddled away, locked in our own homes, and yet Jesus is there with us, coming in to our hearts to offer us His endless mercy, to remind us of our inherent dignity as Christians, and to reiterate the responsibility that we have to proclaim the Good News to the whole world. This is the great joy of which Peter speaks. He experienced it himself. He saw it in others. That same joy is now offered to us.

Let’s reflect on those wonderful, uplifting words of a sinner who is reconciled, of an apostle who is renewed in his faith and love for the Risen Lord – words that today are directed to each one of us: “This is a cause of great joy for you, even though you may for a short time have to bear being plagued by all sorts of trials; so that, when Jesus Christ is revealed, your faith will have been tested and proved like gold – only it is more precious than gold, which is corruptible even though it bears testing by fire – and then you will have praise and glory and honour.” Amen.