

Sunday Homily

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

11 APRIL 2021

YEAR B

"My Lord and my God!"

John 20:28

Illustration

It is Caravaggio, the seventeenth-century Italian artist, who captures most vividly the moment when Thomas makes his declaration of faith in the risen Christ. Jesus has loosened his garment. In the dim light of the spluttering candle, he grips Thomas by the wrist. Thomas extends a distinctly grubby forefinger which Jesus guides into the loose flesh of the gaping wound in his side. Thomas' brow is deeply furrowed with doubt and incomprehension. His eyes follow the direction of his extended forefinger. This is the moment of decision. Can he believe what he sees? He can, and he does: "My Lord and my God!" It is a life-changing moment for Thomas. It remains a crucial moment for the many who would come after him in the course of time, "who have not seen and yet have come to believe".

Gospel Teaching

Because of his initial reluctance to believe that Jesus had risen, Thomas has given his name to all who find it difficult to believe, or experience moments of doubt. Yet Thomas was one of the original twelve whom Jesus sent out to proclaim the Gospel with very little to sustain them. When there were threats on Jesus' life, it was Thomas who encouraged the others: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." So we need to look again at the circumstances surrounding his declaration of faith.

As we are presented with Thomas' disbelief, we have to ask, "Why should he have believed?" We know very little about the disciples. We cannot know what went on between them, or what bound them together. We do know conflicts existed, as over which of them would be the most important. So when the others told Thomas they had seen the risen Jesus, it could have been that they were having a joke, in the worst possible taste, at his expense. Nor could he know they had already seen Jesus' wounds for themselves.

But the appearance of the risen Jesus confirmed that the disciples had not been joking. They had been genuine, and now Jesus was actually there amongst them again. Having greeted them all, "Peace be with you", it was to Thomas that he turned. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side."

This is the scene Caravaggio captured in his painting. The setting is commonplace, simply the house where the disciples met and locked the doors for fear of their enemies. The artist gives us no shining lights or angels waiting at the edges of his canvas. Yet it is a profoundly religious moment, lit by Thomas' declaration of faith. He is confronted by Jesus in person, a different person, yet essentially the same, who addresses him directly: "Do not doubt but believe." Thomas has to make up his mind, reach his decision. The evidence of the resurrection is there before his eyes. There is only one conclusion he can come to: "My Lord and my God!" Thomas is declaring his faith in the risen Christ, acknowledging Christ's claim upon his life from now on, and committing the whole of his life to proclaiming the Gospel of the dying and rising of Jesus. Ancient tradition has it that this took him as far afield as India.

Application

Nevertheless, Thomas' negative reputation lives on. His name stands for doubt, rather than faith. This means that we do Thomas a grave disservice. He has left an abiding and positive legacy to the Church, to all who would seek to follow the risen Christ. In many ways he stands for all of us, represents all of us. Many of us have followed his pattern. We have experienced the same struggle to believe, to come to terms with the Christian faith, to make a commitment to the risen Lord.

There is ample evidence in the Bible of the many who have heard God's call, and felt that it could not be so. How could God be calling them? For ourselves, we may also feel, or have felt, that it must at best be a mistake; at worst, a joke in poor taste. Like Thomas, we have to weigh the evidence, reach our own conclusion, make our own decision. Only then can we make our personal declaration of faith, and all that it implies for our belief, and our commitment to service in the name of the risen Lord. Like Thomas, we have to be able to say, at some stage, and in our own way, "My Lord and my God!"