

Second Sunday of Easter

I have been trying to imagine what it might be like for the Catholics of Sri Lanka as they consider gathering again to celebrate the Resurrection this weekend. Perhaps those who have that courage to come to Mass might be identifying with the first disciples who were described as being in a room with locked doors fearing that their enemies would harm them.

And how would the people who had lost their loved ones hear the message of today's gospel? When Jesus came on Easter Sunday evening, he greeted his disciples with the greeting, "Peace be with you" That greeting was not just for those who had gathered in the upper room. It is a greeting for the people of Sri Lanka in their grief and a greeting for you and me as we gather for Eucharist today. Jesus is gifting us with that peace that he promised to give his disciples at the last supper, a peace that the world cannot give, a peace that comes from being in union with the one who has conquered fear and death and the forces of evil. Perhaps today we need to hear that greeting of peace more than ever.

When Jesus shows the wounds in his hands and his side, He is not just confirming that he is the same person who died on the cross, but those wounds are the constant reminders of the unconditional love that Jesus has for each one of us. He allowed himself to be nailed on the cross in love for us. The last of his life blood flowed from his pierced side so that we could live with him forever.

We are invited to hear what Jesus says next as also being directed to us. "As the Father sent me, so am I sending you." And for us to do that he breathes his own Spirit of love upon us. The same expression is used here to breathe life upon the apostles, as is used in the Book of Genesis for God breathing life into the first human beings in the Garden of Eden. It is with that Spirit of life that we can act as reconcilers for God. "Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven. For those whose sins you retain they are retained."

I often wondered why Jesus should use those particular words to his disciples on the night of the Resurrection. Why did he commission his disciples to forgive sins? Why didn't he tell them to go out and talk about him to others and try to convince them to believe in him?

Perhaps it was because forgiveness and reconciliation were what Jesus was all about. That was why he lived and died. He wants us to continue his work. The love and mercy for all human kind that he showed on the cross is now entrusted to us his disciples. Jesus calls each one of us to be people of mercy, people of forgiveness, people who allow his work of reconciliation to be present wherever we are. But with all the power that is given to be reconcilers, the Lord also gives us the freedom to use that power or to waste it. We know how easy it is to block God's work by refusing to forgive those who have wronged us.

The story of what happens one week later is told for our sake too. When Thomas returns to join the other disciples, he cannot believe that they have seen the Lord on their word alone. He needs to see Jesus and touch his wounds. On the following Sunday Jesus comes again to allow Thomas to see and touch him. In love he offers his hands and his side to him. "Put your finger here; look, here are my hands. Give me your hand; put it into my side. Doubt no longer but believe." Jesus understands how hard it is for Thomas, and for any of us to become believers. He does not want Thomas or any of us to remain in a state of uncertainty and unbelief. He wants Thomas to experience the deep joy of knowing that Jesus is alive and with him. Jesus has that same longing for us to believe. Thomas is so moved by Jesus' love for him that he is able to say, "My Lord and My God." Nowhere else in the gospel do we find such a profound act of faith in Jesus.

The final words that Jesus says to Thomas are not words of rebuke to him, but they are words of encouragement and blessing for us. "You believe because you can see me. Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe." Thomas and those other disciples to whom Jesus appeared came to faith by seeing Jesus. But everyone else who has

come to faith in Jesus has needed those first witnesses to tell the story of what they have seen and to live the truth of what they have heard.

And this is the only way that faith in Jesus can be handed on today. You and I can be grateful for all those who have lived their faith in Jesus in such a way that we have caught it from them. And central to the faith that we have caught is our ability to forgive. When we refuse to forgive, we refuse to be like Jesus. The next generation of Sri Lankans will come to faith in Jesus or lose their faith in him largely by the way their parents and friends respond to the tragedy of last Sunday's bombings.

May each of us tell the story of Jesus' resurrection by the way that we live. May we make room for the forgiving love of Jesus to be at work in our lives no matter whatever else happens. May others come to know who Jesus is by knowing us as faithful, compassionate forgiving people.