

Second Sunday of Easter 2021

A Reflection by Fr Sylvester O'Flynn OFM Cap., Rochestown, Cork

Encountering the Risen Lord

As we noted at the start of Lent, the number forty is usually associated with a period of preparation. Following the forty days of Lent, there are forty days between the Resurrection and the Ascension. My very young grand-nephew asked me a deep question one day. "Where was Jesus in the time between his Resurrection and Ascension?" All I could say was that he came back on several occasions to strengthen the faith of his disciples. Today's Gospel refers to these encounters as signs which were recorded "so you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name" (John 20:31). Disciples who had once known him by physical recognition had to learn how to recognise his presence by faith. "Thomas, you believe because you can see me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

There is a common pattern in these stories. Initially, people who were familiar with Jesus no longer recognise him until he does something and then they recognise him. This moment of recognition is the key to the story, portraying how Christians down the ages have come to recognise the presence of the Lord in their lives.

Present in a personal relationship

Mary Magdalene was weeping outside the empty tomb. Even when the Lord appeared to her, she did not recognise him by sight nor by the sound of his voice. But when the Lord called her by name, then she recognised him. Her experience stands for the faith that begins in a sense of personal call and invitation from the Lord.

Present in the Bread of Life

The disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognise that it was Jesus who was their companion on the road. They were going in the wrong direction, away from Jerusalem, the city of pilgrimage. They admit that they had lost hope when Jesus was crucified. Now they were heading towards Emmaus, known for its mineral springs, a place to chill out. He warmed their hearts as he opened up the Scriptures for them. It was when he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them that their eyes were opened and they recognised him. But he disappeared from their sight. The story clearly signifies how people recognise that the Lord is with us on the road of life through the Eucharist, the bread of life.

Present in Divine Mercy

Coming back to the Gospel for this Sunday, there are two apparitions. It is now a week since the day of Resurrection but the apostles are locked behind closed doors, not knowing what to do, confused and afraid (John 20: 19-31). There is an old Irish saying that God's help is closer than the door. The Risen Lord appeared in that room of fear. He showed them his wounded hands and side. He is recognised in his wounded condition. Possibly the wounds stirred the memory of the words of Isaiah, "Ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried. By his wounds we are healed." He is the wounded sacrificial Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. He told them "As the Father sent me, so am I sending you." The mission he gave them was to continue his ministry of mercy in the forgiveness of sins. How could they perform this divine work? It would be in the power of the Holy Spirit.

He breathed the divine power on them. "Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained." Retaining means calling a sin a sin and telling people that divine mercy is being blocked until they humbly repent of their wrongdoing. The message for Christians down the ages is to recognise the presence of God in the forgiveness of sins.

Doubting Thomas

The Apostle Thomas was missing that day. He absolutely refused to believe what the others told him about the Lord's appearance. He was so loyal to Jesus that he once declared that he was willing to go to Jerusalem with him and die with him. But he was loyal to a fault. Loyalists, political or religious, find it very hard to accept change. He was so loyal to the former days of knowing Jesus physically that he was not ready to know him by faith instead of physical recognition. When the Lord appeared the following Sunday, he invited Thomas not only to see his wounds but to touch them. Touching the wounds is very significant because it suggests getting in touch with any wounded part of our inner self. The steps in a rehabilitation programme begin with getting in touch with the inner wounds of life. The humble admission of an inner hurt or an uncontrolled addiction involves touching the wounded area. Then it is handed over to the Higher Power. And there is no Power higher than the Saviour who knows suffering from the inside because he has experienced it personally. He achieved the ultimate victory when he conquered death itself by rising from the dead.

The story of Thomas is a wonderful example of how our very wounds can be the place where we get the grace of knowing that the Lord is closer to us than the closed door. I have met many people in recovery who have developed a powerful prayer-life.

Prayer

Risen Lord, thank you for these encounter stories which tell us how you are with us. As you made yourself known to Mary Magdalene when you called her by name, may we experience the joy of a daily, personal relationship with you.

You are with us on the road of life even when we are going in the wrong direction. As with the disciples going to Emmaus, stay with us and sustain us in Holy Communion, the Bread of Life.

When we fall into sin, cleanse us in the Sacrament of Divine Mercy.

When we are struggling with wounds and problems, grant us your help which supports us and heals us. Alleluia!