

## Readings for the Second Sunday of Easter

7<sup>th</sup> April 2024

### First Reading: Acts 4:32-35

The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

### Second Reading: 1 John 1:1-2:2

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

### Gospel: St John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

### **A Reflection for the Second Sunday of Easter**

When I started to prepare this reflection, the thing that kept coming into my mind was John Lennon's song: *Imagine*; I expect some of you know it. Lennon's words are generally regarded as atheistic and, indeed, the song starts by asking us to imagine that there is no heaven and no hell, no countries and no religion. The implication is that he is blaming all the ills of the world on religion and nationalism. And he may well be right if we don't make the mistake of equating institutional religion with God.

The song goes on to ask us to imagine 'all the people living in peace'; to imagine 'no possessions, no need for greed or hunger, a brotherhood of man'; to imagine 'all the people sharing all the world'. I read these words, how Lennon imagines the world could be, and it seems to me to be a picture of God's kingdom, of how God would like the world to be, of how God created it to be. We could even regard it as imagining heaven ... and I am quite happy to imagine the possibility that there is no hell (whatever we think hell might be) if everyone lives in harmony with God's ways.

Imagine what the world would be like if we all lived as God wished. In today's passage from Acts, we are given a vision of an ideal Christian community, a community in which everything is shared, a community in which, to borrow Lennon's words, there were 'no possessions, no need for greed or hunger'. What would the world be like today if, in a global sense, we all shared what we have with those in need, human and non-human? If we weren't conditioned to take what we need, or think we need, first, before considering others. If we didn't regard the earth's resources as there to serve our desires, and if we didn't put humanity's needs ahead of all other living things. Imagine.

Conversely, the passage from the first letter of John is telling us that we don't need to imagine; in Jesus we already have a glimpse of God's Kingdom, of what the world could and should be like. The writer tells us that they are eyewitnesses and want to share what they have seen. That life itself, the eternal life that is God – life that was from the beginning, came to life in human form in Jesus. They saw and touched him; they were his friends. In sharing fellowship with him, they also shared fellowship with the Father and glimpsed God's future, full of light and life and joy and hope.

Now they want to share this fellowship with all those who did not get the chance to meet Jesus. Just as God 'spoke' through Jesus, through Jesus God showed us what God was like, he continues through those who were his friends, and as he continues to speak through those who have followed him ever since. This gift of fellowship is for all people.

The writer goes on to point out that this is not to deny the reality of sin. Although, in the life of Jesus, we were shown how God would like us to live - a life that we may note was not known for its worldly possessions, a life of service that prioritised the poor, it is part of the fallen human condition that we are unable to live up to that example. We all mess up, we all get things wrong, even as we try not to, but this does not spoil our relationship and our fellowship with God. To walk in the light is to be authentic and honest about who we are. If we are prepared to be honest and acknowledge our shortcomings, we have an advocate with the Father in Jesus. Jesus' sacrifice was to cleanse us and to restore our relationship with a God of love, rather than to assuage the wrath of an angry God.

We have glimpsed the reality of God's Kingdom. Imagine if we could live up to this vision, to walk in honest relationship and fellowship with God and one another. Imagine.

And then we come to the passage from John's Gospel and the story of Thomas. Every year, on the Sunday after Easter, this is our Gospel reading. The other readings vary, but the Gospel is the same. Other Gospel accounts of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances are shared across the 3-year lectionary cycle, but Thomas appears every year. Why this one? Why Thomas?

Perhaps it is because this story is more like our reality; it requires less imagination. Surely, we all know those times when we are having a really off day, or when we are suffering and in pain, or maybe we are depressed, or perhaps mourning the loss of someone or something dear to us, and yet everyone around us seems to be full of the joys. It's as if they are trying to make us feel even worse than we already do. I think Thomas felt like that.

This scene is set on the evening of that first Easter Day. The disciples as a group have spent the last two days grieving the violent death of a dear friend. They are fearful that those in authority who were responsible for Jesus' death would be coming after them. They don't know what to make of the empty tomb some of them have seen that morning and, frankly, they don't believe the reports of the women that they have seen Jesus alive. And then Jesus appears among them and shows them the reality of himself. What must have been initial shock and disbelief gives way to joy. All is not lost, there is renewed hope. In this account, they even receive the gift of the Holy Spirit at this point.

But Thomas isn't there. And when he returns, he doesn't believe them. We can imagine his reaction: this makes no sense, they've all gone mad! He is honest about his feelings, but we can also sense and understand his disappointment and hurt. If Jesus was going to appear, why did he do it then when I wasn't there? Why didn't he wait until I came back? It's not fair! He must be doing it deliberately to exclude me! They're all joyful and trying to make me the same, well I'm not! 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.' We know those feelings; we understand that reality. It is also part of the human condition.

Thomas had to wait a week for Jesus to return and address his difficulties. It must have been a hard week for him, amidst the joy and anticipation of his friends. Some people have to wait much longer than a week for their difficulties and sadnesses to be resolved, for some it is a lifetime or what remains of it. And it is a salutary reminder to us all that, amidst the things we celebrate, are those who remain hurt, sad, and perhaps angry, for understandable reasons.

But, a week later, Jesus returned and met Thomas in the reality of where he was, in the midst of his confusion and doubts. Jesus return brings reassurance and also reminds us of the need for sensitivity towards those who cannot share our joys, the need to understand and believe them, the need to allow time for healing and hope.

Imagine. Imagine a world where we all live as God wishes. Imagine a world that has glimpsed God's kingdom in the person of Jesus and seeks to follow his example. Imagine a world that is sensitive to the needs and pain of others. A world where we express regret for the things we get wrong and are offered the reassurance of God's love and forgiveness. This is the vision of hope that we hold onto, the world that we aspire to, the world we work to bring about in the here and now. Imagine – it is a God-given vision.