

BELIEVING IN JESUS: 2ND SUNDAY OF EASTER C

When we come together for Mass every Sunday we come to remember Jesus. Our presence and participation in the Eucharist is an act of faith - an act of personal faith and an act of shared faith. In praying together we also help one another believe, hope and love more strongly. So we become a stronger Christian community. It might be said of us what was said in our First Reading today about the infant Church in Jerusalem: "... *the numbers of men and women who came to believe in the Lord increased steadily*".

Our shared faith is above all faith in Jesus Christ. We believe that he has risen from the dead, that he is alive in himself and alive in us, and that he is our Teacher, Lord and Leader. But nobody can do our believing for us. This is powerfully illustrated in our gospel story today.

It's Easter Sunday and the disciples are huddled together in a locked room. After what happened to Jesus just two days before, they dare not venture out because of fear for their lives. But Jesus himself does not hide away. Suddenly he comes among them. His greeting is peace. Their response is joy. For the story-teller John, Easter Sunday is Pentecost, and the gift of the Spirit is the breath of the Risen Christ. The disciples breathe in the Spirit and the Spirit becomes part of their lives. Soon they will leave the Upper Room changed persons - fearless and courageous, energetic and zealous people. In short they will leave as persons animated and fired up by the Holy Spirit to go and tell the good news that is Jesus.

But one of their group is missing. His name is Thomas. He's one of the apostles, part of the group. But he's also a distinct, independent self, a real individual. He cannot be both loyal to the group and disloyal to his own inner self. That would make his loyalty deceitful and worthless. For Thomas honesty and sincerity are, in fact, more important than loyalty and belonging. So when the others say, '*We have seen the Lord*', he declares strongly and emphatically that before he is willing to believe that Jesus is really risen and alive he must see and test the evidence for himself. He won't accept that claim just on their say-so. So it's his honesty that makes him doubt and leads to him being called ever afterwards '*Doubting Thomas*'.

We learn from the gospel story that Thomas comes to believe in the Risen Jesus in the same way as the other disciples, i.e. when he sees the Lord for himself. But in the way John tells the story Thomas stands for all those who have not yet seen the Lord in the flesh but who are called to believe in him just the same. That's where we come into the story. We are among those many generations of believers ever afterwards of whom it may be said: '*Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe.*'

It's understandable that Thomas was so slow to believe. One reason is that he was such a rugged individual, a real self-starter. The other is because he was not present when Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into his fellow-disciples.

But Jesus has given the Spirit to you and me, first at Baptism, then at Confirmation, and subsequently at every Eucharist we celebrate. The Spirit which Jesus gives is the Spirit of truth. It's the same Spirit that empowers us to say to Jesus with Thomas: *'My Lord and my God!'*

Our faith is one of the main gifts the Spirit has given us. But it is not a one-off gift that we lock away in a safe like some precious jewel. As a form of life we must let our faith grow and mature. On the other hand, like other forms of life, our faith can wither and die from neglect and lack of exercise. We need to pray about our faith, think about our faith, and express it in works of love.

This does not mean that we will never have any doubts. After all even the great Mother Teresa had to struggle with doubts her whole life long. But if like Thomas we care about what we believe, surely sooner or later our faith, revived by the Holy Spirit, will bring us into the presence of God.

The centre and focus of our revived faith will once again be on the great person of Jesus, whom our Second Reading today has called *'the Living One'*, the very one recognised by Believing Thomas as *'My Lord and my God'*.

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