

## Second Sunday of Easter

*Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them: "Peace be with you."...A week later...Jesus came and stood before them: "Peace be with you", he said; then to Thomas: "Take your finger and examine my hands. Put your hand into my side. Do not persist in your unbelief, but believe."*

John 20, 19-31

I have some sympathy for Thomas who has been held up to ridicule for his lack of faith for as long as the expression "doubting Thomas" has been part of our language. His gaffe was obviously remembered by and talked about in the earliest Christian community. While his choice of words was decidedly lacking in sensitivity, he was expressing a measure of what we could describe as "healthy scepticism". It's important to remember that he belonged to a relatively small group of followers of the Jesus who had just been executed. That group was still in shock when it was asked to believe the unbelievable: that their leader who had been brutally done to death was now risen from the grave. And Thomas was away when their risen leader paid the group a visit. No wonder he reacted as he did, effectively telling the others that he was not going to swallow the codswallop they were dishing out. He was being asked to accept a dramatic, incredible reversal of reality. And he reacted as we are all inclined to do in the face of any significant change or astounding reversal. He resisted, he raised questions, he cast doubts. In that respect, he is a mirror for all of us.

For most of us, our religious faith is something into which we were born. As we grew and developed, our faith was nourished by our family, our school and our parish. Some of us pursued courses in theology or spirituality or scripture that helped us to grow into a more mature, adult faith. The faith we have now is almost certainly different from that which we had when we finished at school. And in the intervening years, it may well have been shaken up or put to the test. Whatever our personal history, we all know from experience that it's easier to be a "card-carrying Catholic" in a prevailing sympathetic or tolerant culture. There was a time, not too many years ago, when Hollywood portrayed the Catholic priesthood as an attractive and noble vocation. Many of us can remember movies such as *The Song of Bernadette*, *The Lilies of the Field* and *The Keys of the Kingdom* in which priests and religious were held up as heroes. The climate has changed and the prevailing culture lionises atheism and pillories the Church and its leaders for their failure to deal properly with scandals of sexual abuse. It is harder for us now to stand up and proclaim our adherence to Christ and his Gospel.

There is no doubt that some Catholics are disillusioned by what they regard as poor leadership by some Church leaders. There is also little doubt that sexual abuse by priests and religious has shaken the confidence of many Catholics, some of whom will offer all manner of "reason" for wanting to walk away. Just a couple of years ago, the American priest and writer, Andrew Greeley writing about the reasons people give for getting out of Catholicism had this to say: "Most of the reasons I hear advanced...are tales of what some priest did or said, of what some nun taught you, of some lunacy propagated by a local bishop,...of some rule that a liturgist said you had to obey, of the moronic failure of the church to deal with the paedophile crisis, of the denial by many priests that there is a sexual abuse crisis, of the

failure of bishops to speak out against war... These are, in all candour, lousy reasons for decamping...though they often rise from great suffering. They equate the Catholic heritage with the stupidities of its leaders, which have been worse in the past than in the present. Frank Sheed, the English Catholic writer put it nicely long ago: ‘We are not baptized into the hierarchy; do not receive the Cardinals sacramentally; will not spend an eternity in the beatific vision of the pope. Christ is the point. I, myself, admire the present pope, but even if I criticised him as harshly as some do, even if his successor proved to be as bad as some of those who have gone before, even if I find the church...a pain in the neck, I should still say that nothing that a pope (or a priest) could do or say would make me wish to leave the church, although I might well wish that they would leave.’”

**FOR CHRIST IS THE POINT!** Though it took some effort and cost some personal embarrassment, that is the realisation to which Thomas eventually came. That’s what led him to make his humble proclamation of faith: “My Lord and my God!”

In his post-resurrection appearances to his disciples, Jesus greeted them with “Peace.” But the peace he offered is not merely the absence of conflict. Christ’s peace is the hard work of putting aside our own personal doubts and fears in order to imitate his compassion; it is the hard work of pulling ourselves out of our own tombs of despair and anger in order to live our lives in a spirit of joy and gratitude. The peace of Christ is realised in loving when it is most difficult to love, in putting aside our own disappointments and doubts for the sake of others, in forgiving when we feel too angry or disappointed to forgive, in reaching out even though we feel our efforts will be rejected. The Risen Christ’s gift of peace is a peace that mirrors his own selflessness, compassion and joy. The invitation to us is to accept it gratefully and, in turn, pass it on. Our faith in the risen Christ will be validated only by the way we act.