

Homily: Third Sunday of Easter 2021

I imagine that most people have had the experience of hearing the same story from two different sources – maybe reading two different accounts of the same event or hearing two family members give their perspective on some memory from years gone by. When this happens, we can tell it's the same event, but we also notice the different focus of each account, the various details they choose to recall or to emphasise. Actually, we've all had this experience at Mass in the last couple of weeks, because we've heard two Gospel accounts of the same event. Last week we heard St John's account of the risen Lord appearing to the disciples on Easter Sunday evening, with St Thomas absent from the gathering; today we hear St Luke describe the same encounter.

At first hearing, they may sound quite different, but despite the difference in feel, both accounts pick up the same essential details. Both John and Luke recall that the risen Lord makes an unexpected appearance and greets the disciples with the words, "Peace be with you". Both recall how He sent them out: last week we heard Jesus say "As the Father sent me, so am I sending you"; today, the Lord tells the disciples that they must go out in His name to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins. That gift of forgiveness is a central theme of John's narrative: "Those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven," Jesus promises. Both John and Luke make it very clear that Jesus' resurrection was a bodily event: He shows them the wounds of His hands and His side, so that they know that it is the same Jesus, risen in the flesh, who stands among them. Luke even recalls that the Lord ate fish with them. Both accounts also speak of the gift of the Holy Spirit. John tells us that Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit", whilst in Luke's account, the Lord talks about them being "clothed with power from on high" – the gift of the Holy Spirit which they will receive in its fulness at Pentecost.

And just as last week we heard of Thomas, who "refused to believe", so today St Luke explains that all the disciples struggled to have faith in the resurrection, even when the risen Lord Himself stood among them. "Their joy was so great that they could not believe it", he tells us. And the Lord asks them: "Why are you so agitated, and why are these doubts rising in your hearts?" They cannot accept that He is risen, so they doubt, they are frightened and agitated. Whenever we find ourselves fearful, anxious or agitated, it is in some way because we have forgotten the truth of the resurrection. Jesus is risen: He has overcome even our greatest enemy, death. His resurrection proclaims to us: in the end, all will be well. Everything is in God's hands; He has conquered all. There is never truly anything to fear. But, like the first disciples, we are slow to believe and we allow doubts and anxieties to rise in our hearts. The risen Lord does not want us to be agitated or worried. He says to us, again and again, "Peace be with you. I am risen from the dead."

Sometimes people ask me for advice about doubts they have. They perhaps struggle with some aspect of our faith, some teaching they don't understand, some particular belief that's hard to accept. Often these are not really doubts at all; they are simply questions, difficulties in understanding. St John Henry Newman said, "A thousand difficulties do not make one doubt." We can struggle to appreciate something or to understand how it can be,

without really doubting that it's true. It's significant that Jesus asks why these doubts are rising in the disciples' *hearts*, rather than their minds. Our faith, and our doubts, run more deeply than our thoughts. Think, for example, of the Eucharist. We might really struggle to understand: how can it be that bread and wine truly become the Body, Blood, soul and divinity of Christ? How can these things truly be Jesus among us? We can have these questions while still feeling the closeness of the Lord in this sacrament. We can find it impossible to understand, and yet still experience the presence and action of Jesus here in the Eucharist. Our hearts know, even if our minds are too small to understand. And so, even as we question, we can still experience the peace of the Lord. Conversely, we can understand and accept with our minds, but struggle to really believe. We know, for example, that the Lord always forgives us when we make a good confession; but sometimes people find it hard to accept that they have really been forgiven. If this happens, a doubt rises in our hearts, and it disturbs our peace. The Lord does not want this!

Wherever there is faith in the risen Lord, we can find peace. In the resurrection, we see the ultimate triumph of good over evil, of life over death. We see the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation with God. We see a future, we receive hope. Whenever we lack hope, whenever we lose our peace, whenever we drift from union with the Lord, it is because we doubt, or at least have forgotten, the resurrection of Jesus. On every one of these fifty days of the Easter season, let's remind ourselves that Jesus is risen. All will be well. Let's ask the risen Lord to dispel all doubts from our hearts, that His presence may fill us with joy, and that His peace may be ours.

Fr Andrew

