**Homily – 2nd Sunday of Easter (A)**

*Acts 2: 42-27, 1 Pet. 1:3-9 & Jn. 20:19-31*

We celebrate today the Octave Day of Easter. We don’t really hear much about “Octaves” any more, although they used to be a very prominent – and probably rather confusing – element of the old Liturgical Calendar; since Vatican II, the Church keeps only two, the Octaves of Christmas and of Easter – the former closing with the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, the latter closing with Low Sunday, the 2nd Sunday of Easter.

Despite their comparative scarcity in the modern calendar, the idea of an “Octave” of a feast is very ancient. In the instructions for keeping the great Jewish feasts in Leviticus, each feast – Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles – is extended across seven days of solemn offering, with a holy assembly held on the eighth day, so that each feast stretches effectively over an entire week. But there is a theological, as well as a practical significance to this idea. The Jewish week, like ours, but unlike those of other ancient cultures, had seven days – harking back to the six days of Creation followed by the Sabbath rest – with the new week starting on the eighth day, which was also the same day of the week as the first. Seven was the number of creation, the number of completion, the number of perfection. But, in a sense, eight “trumped” seven, since it was the number of new beginnings, the number *beyond* perfection, the number of God’s definitive salvation and re-creation. Something of this sense seems to have carried over into the early Christian Church – not only eventually in its calendar, but also in its buildings. For as soon as it was possible to do so, the Church started building her baptisteries as octagons – there is a very fine example at St John Lateran, and two more at Ravenna. The very buildings in which the old life of nature was submerged in the font and the new Risen life of Christ shared by the neophytes emerged from the waters expressed this “octave pattern” of salvation – almost, to quote T.S. Eliot, “in my end is my beginning” (Four Quartets). Each Sunday, then, our weekly commemoration of the Lord’s Resurrection is both the first day of the week and the eighth – the day of creation and of re-creation, of our first “salvation” through God’s forming beauty and order out of chaos, and of our ultimate salvation in Christ.

And of course, that is not just all about “numerology”. That “octave pattern” has a special resonance today as we hear that story of Thomas’ encounter with the Lord “eight days later”. If you will excuse what may seem like a digression here, something suddenly struck me during the course of this week as I was trying to prepare this homily. Since it is the Easter Octave, we sing the same antiphons and psalms at Lauds and Vespers each day. The first psalm at Lauds every morning, both at Ampleforth and in the Roman Office which we use here, is Ps.62 (63) – the psalm which begins “O God, you are my God, for you I long; for you my soul is thirsting”. It is a psalm which has been associated with Lauds, Morning Prayer, since the very earliest days of the Roman Rite, and very beautiful. But what struck for the first time are the lines which conclude the psalm as printed in the Breviary: *My soul clings to you: your right hand holds me fast* (Ps.62:9). I must have sung those lines thousands of times over the years, but they had never really jumped out at me before. What struck me was the intimacy of those words – the soul *clinging* to God, and God – in response – holding the soul with his right hand, as a Father might his child, in that way that babies do, spread-eagling themselves on their Dad’s chests while Dad supports them with an arm. There is a mutuality there that I hadn’t noticed before, a *mutual* clinging and holding, a mutual embrace of touch, of love, of care.

And perhaps that’s what made me notice this phrase in the light of that Gospel we heard a few moments ago, and indeed, of the gospels we have heard all week. Jesus enters that upper room on this eighth day, the day of new beginnings. He is clearly well aware of Thomas’ doubts, his obstinacy, his need to see and to prove what the others have avowed. He is just as clearly aware that Thomas, along with the others, had all run off at the first sign of trouble, and left him alone to face judgment, condemnation, suffering and death. Yet none of this is mentioned. Instead, Jesus gently takes Thomas’ hand in his and shows him the mark of the nails. He takes Thomas’ hand in his, and places it gently in the wound over his heart. That right hand of Christ, the right hand of God, holds Thomas’ hand gently but firmly – and leaves Thomas’ soul clinging to the Lord as he falls to his knees and makes his great confession: “My Lord and my God”.

And the same is true in all those Easter Gospels. There are no words of condemnation, no recriminations from Jesus against his friends. There is only gentleness – whether the soft speaking of Mary’s name in the garden by which she finally recognises him, the words of teaching on the road to Emmaus which made the disciples hearts burn within them or the intimate breakfast by the lakeside in Galilee after the new miraculous catch of fish. Those quiet gentle moments are so very ordinary, so commonplace – at table, on the road, in the garden – nothing about them is dramatic, except for the fact that it is the Risen Lord who is there, unexpectedly present in the ordinary events of the disciples’ lives. As his hand touches theirs to hold them, so they learn to cling to him in a new way.

And perhaps there is something there for us too to ponder on this Easter Day, this first and eighth day, this day of new beginnings. The Risen Christ longs to reach out his hand to us too, unexpectedly, even in the very ordinariness of our lives. He says no words of condemnation for our own sins, for those sins which took him to Calvary. Rather he stretches that same wounded hand out to us as he did to Thomas, to give us his Body and Blood, his very life, just as he did that first Good Friday, that we might learn to cling to him more closely, that we too might say with Thomas: *My Lord and my God*. Happy indeed are we, who have not seen but yet believe.

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