

Homily on Thomas Sunday

15 April 2018, Fr Dc Filip Lommaert

Christ is risen!

Today on this first Sunday following the glorious Resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we celebrate Antipascha, meaning the renewal of Pascha. Following directly after the Paschal week, it completes the most solemn part of the great feast. This Sunday is also called Bright Sunday and Thomas Sunday.

Today, the Lord appeared again to the Apostles. But this second appearance of the Saviour was especially for the benefit of the Apostle Thomas, who was absent when Jesus Christ, our God, first appeared after His Resurrection.

St. Gregory the Theologian wrote: "The law of honouring the day of renewal is ancient and of good intent; or it would be better to say, to honour with the day of renewal a new act of goodness.

But was not the first day of Resurrection, the Sunday which followed the Holy and Light-bearing night, the day of renewal? Why is that name given to the present day? That day was the day of salvation, and this day is the day of remembrance of salvation" (Homily 44, on the Sunday of Renewal).

During Bright Week we all lived in the Paschal joy of our risen Lord Jesus Christ; and this joy, just like that of the Holy Apostles, was mixed with confusion:

Just over a week ago we were faced with the death of Him Who is the Source of life, but now we can rejoice, having been raised to life by Him Who had been in the tomb.

Just like the Holy Disciples and Apostles during the first days following the resurrection, we vividly remembered the passions of Christ during the reading of the 12 Gospels; the Lord's death and the taking down of His Body from the Cross, the burial of our Saviour, and the long hours awaiting the miracle on Great and Holy Saturday.

Although from the very early morning on the day of the resurrection, the good news of the resurrection had been carried throughout creation, and even though angels from Heaven (Mark 16:6) and Holy Myrrh-bearing women on earth (Luke 24:10) and even the guards at the Sanhedrin (Matthew 28:11) had already told of this miracle, the Apostles were still in a state of fear and doubt, hiding behind locked doors "for fear of the Jews" (John 20:19).

We should not be surprised at the Disciples' doubt. They had been witnesses to the greatest miracle in the history of creation: humans had killed God, and then He rose from the dead, and saved the dying human race from the claws of Hell.

Christ's disciples, following the arrest of their teacher, forgot all of His prophesies concerning the things about to take place. They did not believe the miraculous story of the Holy Myrrh-bearing women (Mark 16:11, Luke 24:11), and even while talking to the

Resurrected Christ face to face, they hesitated to trust their own hearts (Luke 24:25) which were burning and trembling in the presence of God (Luke 24:32).

Their remarkable unbelief (Luke 24:41), and human weakness, incapable of encompassing the magnitude of the miracle that took place, is reflected in the famous words of the Apostle Thomas: "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." (John 20:25)

People often refer to Thomas as "doubting," not really considering the depth and meaning of the "doubt" of this Holy Apostle. But let us have a closer look at this man.

Was his doubt the same as that of the Judeans who yelled about the Saviour Whom they crucified, "If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him." (Matthew 27:42); or was it similar to what we hear from our contemporaries: "If God exists, let Him show Himself to all, and we will believe in Him and live happily ever after"?

Reading through scripture it appears that the ancient scribes and Pharisees knew all about Christ's miracles, and guessed Who Jesus of Galilee really was. But every time they were faced with the Divine, somehow they became even more rooted in their blasphemy.

Having found out that Christ had healed a man born blind, instead of lifting praises they spewed curses: "We know that this man is a sinner (John 9:24), [and] you were completely born in sins, and are you teaching us?" (John 9:34).

Having heard that Christ had resurrected a man who had been dead for four days, and, apparently, no longer having any more doubts about Christ's divinity, the chief priests decided "to kill Lazarus as well" (John 12:10).

Finally, after being faced with the fact of Christ's miraculous Resurrection, and having heard the eyewitness accounts of the guards (Matthew 28:11) who shook for fear of an angel of the Lord, and became like dead men (Mathew 28:4), the elders gave a large sum of money to the soldiers and deceived the people (Matthew 28:12-14), further deepening their blasphemy.

Is it not the same with modern day Pharisees, who after having come face to face with the Holy Resurrection of our Lord, are still not convinced by this great miracle, and only make their blasphemy worse?

But Saint Thomas is not one of them. We know about his faithfulness and sacrificial love for our Lord and Saviour. After following Jesus Christ for three years, Thomas was very much aware of the dangers that Christ faced from the scribes and the Pharisees.

The other Disciples also understood this very well. When the Saviour decided to go to Jerusalem, the Apostles tried to talk Him out of it, warning Him of the dangers (John

11:8). But it was the Apostle Thomas who said, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him" (John 11:16). These are not exactly the words you would expect from a doubter!

His doubt of course is providential for us. Here we have proof of Christ's Resurrection. One who disbelieved has come to belief.

Thomas did not know how the Resurrection was possible, and yet he saw and felt it with his own eyes and therefore believed it, for it would have been perverse to disbelieve. How can anyone now still not believe in the Resurrection of Christ after the testimony of Thomas?

Following the Ascension of Christ, the Apostle Thomas, according to Church Tradition, went to preach the Gospel in one of the furthest, most hostile and most difficult to reach places of the ancient world – India - where he ended up being tortured and killed for Christ.

But on that day, a week after the Resurrection, when the Saviour came to His Disciples and Thomas was with them, the Apostle Thomas needed only a push, only a step, in order for him, who so selflessly loved his Teacher, to realise to Whom he had devoted his life.

"My Lord and my God!" exclaimed Thomas from the bottom of his loving heart. God comes to a person such as Thomas. This is the kind of person that Christ would allow to be touched by!

But is it not strange that when the Risen Lord appears to His disciples, His glorified body still bears His wounds? Christ was not raised as a ghost or a spirit, but as a whole human being with a body.

His horrible wounds were part of Who He freely chose to become, a human being for our sakes, and He arises victorious with those wounds. He has taken these wounds upon Himself purely out of love for us and He has used them to defeat evil and death.

In His desire to save people, Christ suffered everything: mocking and scourging, torture and shameful death, and even others poking at His wounds with their fingers, after His glorious resurrection.

If people expect Him, Christ will even walk through closed doors (John 20:26). But what will He hear having entered our heart? Will He hear from us the words "my Lord and my God" or will He only receive mocking and scourging?

Will we worship Him, as did St. Thomas, or will we crucify Him with our lack of repentance and hurl the rocks of our sins at Him?

Lord, through the prayers of the holy Apostle Thomas, give us faith and help our unbelief. And may we all seek God and be touched by the light of the Holy Resurrection of His Body!

Amen.