

This Sunday's Readings – the 2nd Sunday of Easter – Today is also known as Divine Mercy Sunday. This is a very recent feast that was decreed by the Congregation of Divine Worship on May 23, 2000 that “throughout the world, the Second Sunday of Easter will receive the name Divine Mercy Sunday, a perennial invitation to the Christian world to face, with confidence in divine benevolence, the difficulties and trials that humankind will experience in the years to come”. From now until Pentecost, the first reading will be from the Acts of the Apostles and not the Old Testament. Also, the Gospel will be from the Gospel of John (except for one Sunday when it is from Luke).

Luke, the author of the Gospel of Luke, also wrote the Acts of the Apostles. Luke was probably Greek as both the Gospel and Acts were written in excellent Greek. Both books were written sometime around 85 AD and really should be considered as a two volume set. The first volume is the Gospel, the story of Jesus, and the second volume is an account of the early Church. Both books were written to Theophilus, which in Greek means “one who loves God”. This probably means that it was written to all those of good will. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2001 article for *The Evangelist* adds this comment on Luke's Acts – “He deliberately expands his Gospel into the Acts of the Apostles to show how Jesus' ministry continues in the Christian community for whom he writes. Jesus' followers don't just remember what he did; they actually continue doing what he did”.

This specific reading from the beginning of Acts, describes the “perfect” Christian community. It is also a perfect example of justice, which is the result of Christian love. Without Christian love, there can be no justice. But is this too good to be true? Fr. Roger Karban in his 1999 syndicated column explains – “The first reading (Acts 2:42-47) contains the first of Luke's three "summaries:" reviews of the early Church's activities placed at strategic spots in the work's first five chapters. Each describes a perfect, faithful, loving Christian community. "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers....All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need." There's one basic problem with this picture: It doesn't correspond to the image of early Christian communities which we find in Paul's letters, especially the Church described in I Corinthians 11. Since a contemporary writing usually is historically more accurate than a writing composed 50 years later, the first followers of Jesus probably didn't live as idyllic an existence as Luke would have us believe. Scholars claim that Luke used his summaries not as a reflection on the past, but as a way to convey his dreams for the future. His descriptions of the early Jerusalem Church expresses his dream for all Christian communities”. Note also that they still meet in the temple area. In the very early years after Christ's Ascension, relations between Christians and Jews was good. However, that was soon to change.

In today's Gospel we read the account of the Apostle Thomas, who had to physically see and touch Jesus before he would believe. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment – “This is the traditional gospel of Low Sunday. The author is here wrestling with what became a real problem in the post-apostolic Church: How could one believe in the risen Lord without the benefit of a resurrection appearance? The answer is that even seeing, as in the case of Thomas, is no guarantee of faith. For Thomas, faith came by hearing the word of the risen One addressing him personally. For those who come after, faith comes through hearing the word of God, through hearing the risen One speak through his apostolic messengers”. Our religion is based on faith. Thomas' faith was not strong – he doubted that Jesus had risen and had appeared to the other apostles. Only after he saw and touched (tactile experience) Jesus did he believe. As Jesus said to Thomas and really to all of us, “Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.” It is interesting to note that there is a tactile experience involved in all the sacraments with the possible exception of the sacrament of Reconciliation. Thomas went on to proclaim the good news of the Gospel to the people of India. This reading marks the end of the original Gospel of John. The final chapter 21, which describes Jesus appearances in Galilee, was a later addition and was not written by John.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* adds these cultural explanations on today's Gospel reading – “A common literary form appears throughout the Bible to describe the divine vocation of a great patriarch or prophet who is called to be the leader of God's people. It

can be found in the vocation stories of Moses (Exod 3:4-4:9); Gideon (Judg 6:11-36ff.); Jeremiah (1:1-10); and Jesus' disciples (Matt 28:16-20; Luke 24:33-53; John 20:19-27; 21:1-19). The complete form has five elements which can be identified in today's passage as follows.

INTRODUCTION

The setting for Jesus' appearance to commission the disciples is a house with locked doors in which the Eleven are gathered. In Jesus' nosy Mediterranean society, people suspect that those who gather behind locked doors are up to no good. Unlocked doors allow the children, the official "spies" or "snoops" in the village, to wander in and out of homes at will, keeping everyone on the up and up. For this reason, John notes that the Eleven were hiding nothing but were rather protecting themselves against attacks from Judeans who did not believe in Jesus. This observation is truer of John's time (especially after 90 C.E.) than of Jesus'. The locked doors have no relationship to Jesus' ability to penetrate them without opening them.

CONFRONTATION, REACTION, REASSURANCE

The sudden appearance of the risen Jesus (confrontation) startles the disciples (reaction), requiring that Jesus set them at ease: "Peace be with you!" (reassurance).

COMMISSION

Three points characterize this commissioning ceremony: (1) the commission is formal ("As the Father has sent me, so I send you" 20:21); (2) they are to preach repentance and forgive sins (20:22-23); and (3) the commission is confirmed by Jesus' sending of the Holy Spirit (20:22).

OBJECTION

It falls to Thomas rather than the newly commissioned apostles to raise an objection. He implies that the apostles may have suffered hallucination, an alternative state of consciousness. He expresses strong doubt about the reality of the risen Jesus. His demand to stick his fingers into the wounds of Jesus in the story created about him by John is well known.

REASSURANCE, SIGN

Ordinarily, deities would be miffed by such objections, but in the heavenly commissions reported in the Bible the divine response is very different. In this story, Jesus returns once again to the disciples chiefly to reassure Thomas, and through him all followers who experience difficulty believing without seeing. The sign is the invitation to Thomas to stick his fingers in the wounds as he wished (20:27). Jesus' gesture works; Thomas is convinced. Modern Western believers have become rather familiar with "literary forms" in the Bible over the past twenty-five years. Parable stories, healing stories, the letters of Paul—all these and more are reported in the Bible in stock, stereotypical (i.e., unchanging) forms. After learning about these many forms and their structure, believers (and often even preachers) say: "So what? What does this mean in the real world?" Today's gospel describes how Jesus commissioned his followers to bring new members into God's covenant community. He had done this earlier in the farewell discourse (13:20; 17:18). Careful study of the literary form and its structure convinces scholars that the commission is addressed to all disciples and is not limited just to the Eleven. All believers are commissioned to bring new members into the community. How does each one of us respond to this commission?"

Joe Juellich, Liturgy Team