Second Sunday of Easter

In the English-speaking world this Sunday has traditionally been known as 'Low Sunday', by way of contrast with the high liturgy of Easter. In Latin it is 'Dominica in albis [deponendis]' – Sunday [Dominica] when the white garments [albis] are laid aside [deponendis] by those who were clothed in them at the Easter Vigil and have been wearing them throughout the octave of Easter. The antiphons, prayers and readings focus on these new members of the Church and on the community into which they have been welcomed.

In the First Reading, Luke describes the wonderful sense of sharing that characterised the early Christian community in Jerusalem as they obeyed Jesus' command to love one another with his love. Even our secular governments have been inspired by this Christian ideal by having in place laws which place curbs on individual greed and provide basic protections for the disadvantaged, just as our schools and hospitals are carrying on the work begun by religious orders in caring for education and the sick. The followers of Jesus in the early community freely and joyfully pooled their resources, which, as Luke tells us, 'were distributed to any members who might be in need.' This is the purpose of the collection which is taken up at the Offertory and of the many special collections to which the community contributes so generously. This is also the aim of the wonderful sharing of talents, time and hospitality, which, thank God, is so obvious among us. The First Reading challenges us to examine ourselves on this matter and to resist the individual pressures of a culture that rewards greed.

The Gospel is about forgiveness and about recognising the presence of the risen Jesus in our midst. Note that Jesus appears to his disciples (not just the Twelve). The scene concerns us all. Jesus offers them peace, as he offers us peace here today. We recall his words at the Last Supper: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you'(John 14:26). He gives them peace by giving them his own Spirit – the Spirit of love, which he shares with God his Father.

Immediately he goes on to speak of forgiveness, for we are not innocent, and unless those we have hurt forgive us we find it hard to be at peace. We can keep people in a bind by refusing to forgive them. Jesus tells us that when we forgive, God forgives.

From the earliest times, the Christian community reserved to the leader of the community (the priest) the forgiveness of certain especially grave, public sins which threatened the life of the community. When the leader forgave, he did so on behalf of the community. His forgiveness was an assurance that the sinner had repented and could be welcomed back to communion. The rite of reconciliation has varied over the centuries and I am sure that all of you have experienced the special peace that comes from humbly confessing our sins to a priest, receiving spiritual advice and hearing the powerful words of Jesus: 'I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'.

Today's Gospel reminds us that most sins are forgiven in a less formal way as we apologise to those we have hurt and they forgive us. In the Our Father we pray: 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'. Jesus assures us that when we forgive he forgives. The Church, therefore, encourages us to have community reconciliation celebrations (see the Rite of penance §36). These do not have priestly absolution, for they are designed for the forgiveness of sins that do not require priestly absolution – the ordinary sins of our daily life.

They provide a wonderful occasion for us as we come together before God as a community, and recognise that we are not alone in our sin as we struggle to live a Christian life in a very complex world and reach out to support each other when we fall. Our ordinary daily sins are forgiven in many ways: whenever we do something loving; whenever we apologise; and especially when we come together here in the Christian Assembly and ask for mercy. The most beautiful of the healing sacraments is the reception of Holy Communion when Jesus himself, for whom we hunger and thirst, enters our souls with his purifying love and shares with us the special intimacy which he enjoys with God.

The Gospel goes on to speak of Thomas – a symbol of hope for us all who, like Thomas, were not there to experience Jesus on the first Easter day. Like Thomas we recognise that we cannot forever rely on the faith of others. Besides, Thomas did well to doubt the excitement of his brothers and sister disciples – for he knew Jesus, and he knew that if Jesus were truly risen he would not get a message to Thomas second-hand, but would come to him personally, as a friend would. We are grateful to our parents and teachers and to the inspiration given us by members of our local parish community and by Christians world-wide. Faith can be caught from holy people. However, in the final analysis we have to welcome grace ourselves. We have to give our own Yes to what God is offering us. We need to be open, watchful and expectant, but let us be assured that Jesus will come – he does so this morning – to invite us to experience his presence. Note what he asks us to do: we are to but our hands into the wounds of Christ – the wounds that are all around us in those whom Jesus loves and calls his brothers and sisters. Whenever we give anyone something to drink, we do it to Jesus.

This brings us full circle. As we welcome the newly baptised into our community, let us commit ourselves to continue building a community worthy of their trust, and let us welcome them and the gift they give us in giving us themselves. Let us build a community which knows human frailty and where forgiveness is generously offered; a community where we find concern and practical care when we are in need; a community in which we love each other with Jesus' own love; a community in which all feel welcome. As Jesus himself said: 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another'(John 13:35).