

De Krijtberg, April 11th 2021, Second Sunday of Easter. John 20:19-31.

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THE NEW EASTER FIRE

Today is the second Sunday of Easter. The gospel offers us two apparitions of the risen Christ to his disciples. The first took place on the evening of the first day of the week, on Easter Sunday, a week ago. Thomas was not there. The second apparition took place a week later, today so to speak. Then also Thomas was present.

A worn-out group

What was left of the group of enthusiastic disciples who had gathered around the charismatic Jesus and traveled with him? No more than a few frightened men behind closed doors, afraid of the evil world outside. Afraid of the high priests, the people incited by them and the occupying Roman power, who had condemned Jesus and had put him away as a rioter. The fearful disciples were also angry with themselves for having abandoned Jesus and fled when he was taken prisoner (Mt. 26:56, Mk. 14:50).

New fire

They sat there that evening, exhausted and depressed, until suddenly they saw Jesus standing among them, different from what he was and yet recognizable. He was recognizable by the wounds in his hands and in his side. And again he was inspiring them. Three times they heard him say: Peace be with you. Not a reproach for abandoning him, not a condemnation, but a wish for peace.

They were raised from their paralysis, not only because they were forgiven, but also because it turned out that Jesus needed them. They were given a task. They were allowed to share in the mission of Jesus: As the Father sent me, so am I sending you. They realized that Jesus needed them to continue his work.

They became enthusiastic again and got new inspiration. Jesus breathed on them and explained what this meant: Receive the Holy Spirit. The text of the gospel refers to the beginning of the book of Genesis. There we read: the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being (Gen. 2:7, cf. Wisdom 15:11 and Ezekiel 37:3-5). On that Sunday evening, a new creation took place in the hall with the closed doors. A new beginning was made.

What was the mission given to the disciples, what did the Spirit prompt them to do? Their mission was: to forgive. We heard in the Gospel reading: Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven (by God). The disciples themselves had been forgiven, now they had to forgive others too. Being forgiven by God and forgiving others are interconnected. This is also expressed in the Lord's Prayer, which we will repeat in the liturgy: forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us (Mt. 6:12).

Thomas's faith

In the second half of the gospel it's Sunday a week later. Again the disciples were together and the doors were closed. And Jesus came into their midst again and wished them peace. But there was a difference from the previous Sunday. Then, Thomas was not there, but now

he is present. He had heard from the disciples that they had seen the Lord. His response was: Unless I can see the holes that the nails made in his hands and can put my finger into the holes they made, and unless I can put my hand into his side, I refuse to believe. Jesus fulfilled his desire: Thomas was allowed to see and to touch.

For some this as an argument for typically Catholic things like pilgrimages, relics, rituals and images, things you can see and touch. Protestants on the contrary believe the sola fide: not seeing and yet believing. But discussions like that were not yet on the agenda at the time. Perhaps Thomas, who was not there, represents the congregation for which John wrote his gospel. This gospel dates back to the end of the first century and probably originated in Asia Minor. The gospel was written for people who had not seen and heard Jesus himself, but who had to believe by hearsay. They are congratulated: Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. Thomas, who was not there, is not at a disadvantage compared to the disciples who were there a week ago: also to him Jesus showed his hands and side.

Thomas's response is significant. He answers: My Lord, my God! Thomas believes, he sees how God is reflected in Jesus. He uses a biblical prayer formula. In Psalm 30, for instance, we read: O LORD my God, I cried to thee for help, and thou hast healed me (Psalm 30:3, compare 2 Sam. 7:28, Ps. 35:23, Jer. 31:18, Zech. 13:9). But at the same time, Thomas uses an expression that was used in the imperial state ideology. Domitian, emperor from 81 to 96 AD, was a contemporary of John. He was the first emperor to be addressed as dominus et deus, lord and god. The creed of Thomas is thus at the same time an anti-imperial statement. The gospel rejects the ideology of the Roman state and confesses to the God of Israel, who showed himself in Jesus.

We are like Thomas

We are like Thomas and like those for whom John wrote his gospel. We too only know Jesus from hearsay. But we stand in the age-old tradition that goes back to that prophetic man from Galilee and the group of enthusiastic followers around him. The words he spoke to his disciples on Easter Sunday have not lost their meaning. They also apply to our current situation: frustration, hatred, fear, aggression and cruelty in different parts of the world. All kinds of negative feelings are aroused, including in ourselves. This self-reinforcing chain of hatred and counter-hatred, of violence and counter-violence, can only be broken through forgiveness and reconciliation.

Forgiveness does not mean forgetting. Jesus appearing to his disciples was identified by the marks of his wounds. The past is not denied, but reconciled. Jesus' wounds are signs of reconciliation between heaven and earth. Because of that reconciliation, the disciples are able to preach reconciliation among the people. Jesus' disciples are those of the evening of the first Sunday, but also Thomas, who was there a week later. Also the congregation of John, more than two generations later, belong to the disciples of Jesus. Even the congregation gathered in any church, more than nineteen centuries later. Reconciliation and forgiveness on micro and macro levels: these are still the ways to peace, the peace that the risen Christ wishes to his disciples.