

Second Sunday of Easter Divine Mercy Sunday - His merciful love pouring into our hearts the power to grow in faith, hope, and love, and to serve him with joy.

April 11, 2021

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews,...” (John 20:19). For fear of the Jews.... Who were the disciples afraid of, really? Exactly who might be after them? The chief priests, the elders, the scribes and the Pharisees who plotted to kill Jesus? The crowd who shouted crucify him? John’s gospel is different from the other three gospels which are so much alike that we call them synoptic, seeing with one eye. All these three gospels make it clear that Jesus had the support of the overwhelming majority of the people. It was the religious leaders who felt threatened by Jesus and plotted to remove him in secret. (Matthew 26, 5; Mark 14: 2, Luke 22: 2). John sees with a different eye. John was the last gospel written, and there is less urgency to the narrative; it contains more discourse, more editorializing, more theology. John talks again and again how Jesus was opposed by “**the Jews**,” how “the Jews” plotted against him, and took up stones to stone him. *Throughout the gospel of John there is a blaming of the Jews,” a general condemnation of an entire group of people with none of the distinctions made by the other gospels. The Gospel of John is almost “anti-Jewish”, at times spectacularly so. We learn from John’s gospel how “the Jews” plotted against Jesus, how the followers of Jesus feared “the Jews”.*

Throughout history, it seems Jews are unpopular. For example, at the **Fourth Lateran Council** convened by Pope Innocent III in 1215, a decree was issued **that Jews should be distinguished in public by having to wear a yellow patch of cloth sewn to their coats.** Yes, people wants the “Jews” to segregate from them. Adolf Hitler’s policy of identifying Jews by forcing them to wear a yellow star on their outer garments was borrowed from the Christian Church. All Jews were expelled from England by 1290, from France by 1394, and then from Spain by 1492. They were forced to leave most of their belongings and property behind. It would be an exaggeration to blame the long, tawdry history of Christian anti-Semitism on the Gospel of John, but it would also be a mistake to think that the repeated antagonistic references to “the Jews” throughout John’s have not had any effect. Are we Catholics anti-Jews then? Absolutely Not!! We pray every year, yes every year at the **Good Friday** Passion of the Lord **Solemn Intercessions: “Let us pray also for the Jewish people, to whom the Lord our God spoke first, that He may grant them to advance in love of His name and in faithfulness to His covenant. may (they) attain the fullness of redemption. Through Christ our Lord. Amen”.**

*However, it is a sad irony that every single year on the first Sunday after Easter we hear, **On the evening of the day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews...**”* We know now which Jew the disciples were hiding from, it is likely that **the Jew they feared was Jesus.** For those hiding in the upper room with locked doors, they knew that one of their number had betrayed Jesus while others had denied him, run away, and abandoned him to face his shameful and humiliating death alone. It was the women and Nicodemus who made the initial hasty arrangements for Jesus’ body after his death, and it was the women who returned with the amazing news that Jesus was not dead, he had risen, the disciples initially refused to believe them. It is easy to imagine that their response to the good news of the women might have initially been to feel ashamed, anxious, even afraid. They had not shown any hint of loyalty, bravery or love for Jesus when he most needed it.

Think about the last person you disappointed or let down, and remember what it felt like when you next encountered that person, and then try to imagine what the disciples were thinking and feeling in that room, hiding from someone behind those locked doors. The friend they had betrayed, denied, abandoned, the one they had left to die alone and then even after

death had distanced themselves from was now alive, walking around, and might possibly be coming to see them. No doubt they're fearful, anxious and concerned about what Jesus may say or do to them, when suddenly he is in their midst, he is standing among them. It appears Jesus understands their anxiety, their shame and fear, for the first words out of his mouth are, **"Peace be with you."** Jesus' initial reaction is to reassure them. "Don't worry," he says, in effect. "I'm not angry or upset with you. It's all right. I'm not holding a grudge". It's a critical moment for them, and for us, because of course each of us is all too aware of the ways we have failed God. All the countless ways we have denied, abandoned, betrayed our faith. It often feels hard to come before God, to pray to Jesus, because we are painfully aware of how wavering and inconstant our faith is. In a way we are like the disciples, hiding away from God behind locked doors, unwilling or unable to come out from behind the locked doors and walls of our guilt and approach God.

It is easy to pray when we feel good about ourselves, when we feel faithful, compassionate, loving and good. It is much harder to pray when we know we have blown it. God knows it, too. Maybe we can pray the **Divine Mercy Chaplet: "For the sake of His sorrowful passion, have Mercy on us and the whole world."** The Second Sunday of Easter is also the **Divine Mercy Sunday. Divine Mercy is God's love reaching down to meet the needs and overcome the miseries of His creatures.** Our brokenness is no barrier to God's love. As Jesus assured his disciples that their monumental instances of bad faith did not diminish his love for them, we are assured of this as well. **His merciful love pouring into our hearts the power to grow in faith, hope, and love, and to serve him with joy.**

This Sunday's Gospel passage from John tells us that when we are tempted to remain cut off from God, hiding behind locked doors, God will come to us. We know at times faith is a struggle, a challenge, a battle and we feel that we've failed God time and time again and we feel uncomfortable about it. But Jesus is always in our midst, in spite of all our efforts to keep him out, and Jesus stands among us, not as our accuser, our prosecutor, but as one who loves and understands us, who assures us, "Peace be with you." **There are times when we cower, unable to pray, anxious over the things we have done and left undone. This story reminds us that we need not fear this Galilean Jew, and that we need to leave the locked room of our anxiety and come out into the world. There is much that Jesus beckons us to do.**