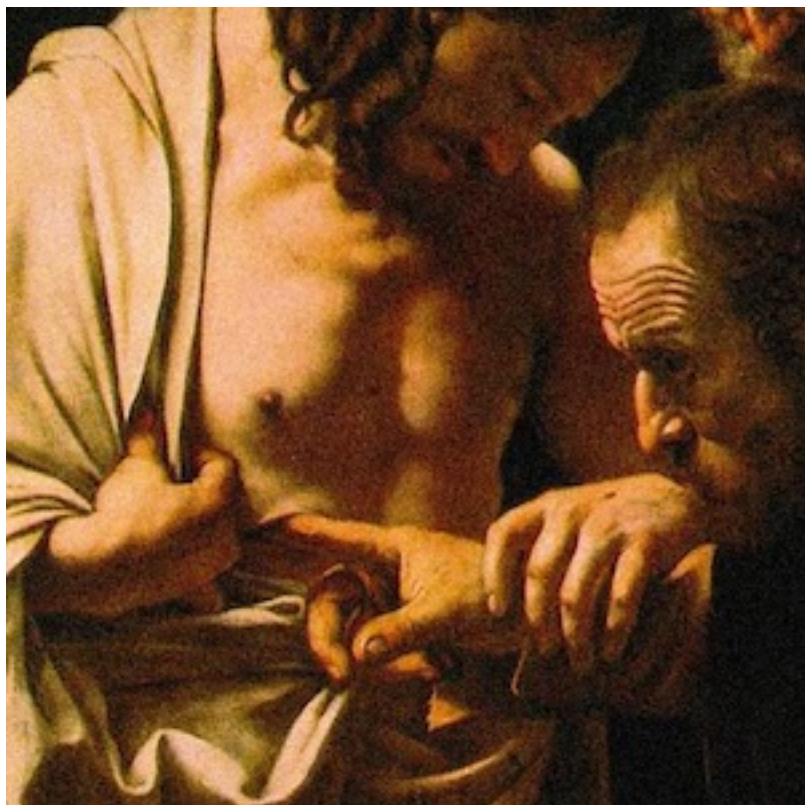


Commentary to the 2nd Sunday of Easter (A)

They rejoice in seeing the Lord

Introduction



The best outfit is worn when one goes to church. It is said in a popular Portuguese language: “Dressed to see God.” This phrase stems from the belief that, on Sunday, the celebrating community comes together to “see the Lord.”

It’s a day of joy, because, as at Easter and “eight days later” (Jn 20:19,26), the Risen Lord becomes present again in the midst of the gathered disciples. He warms their hearts, opening them to understand the Scriptures, and “the breaking of the bread”. He opens their eyes and makes himself known (Lk 24:31-32).

The evangelists show little interest in the chronological accuracy, yet they agree perfectly on a datum: it was on the “first day after the Sabbath” that the disciples saw the Lord. For this reason, the Christian community chose this day dedicated to the listening to the word (Acts 20:7-12), the celebration of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:20-26), prayer and the sharing of goods.

Every first day of every week each put aside what he had managed to save (1 Cor 16:2) and presented his gift to the community, which in turn distributed the offerings to the most needy members or sent them to the poorer communities.

One of the most ancient evidence is offered to us by a pagan writer, Pliny the Younger. In 112, he wrote to Emperor Trajan: Christians “meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing hymns to ‘Christ as a God.’”

It was the day of the Lord—Sunday (Rev 1:10)—the one in which each community celebrated in the rite, its faith, and life.

• To internalize the message, we repeat:

“Like newborn babies, the mother church feeds her children, not with visions, but with the milk of the Word.”

-----1st Reading | 2nd Reading |
Gospel-----

First reading: Acts 2:42-47

The first reading of all the Sundays of Easter is taken from the Acts of the Apostles. The book tells of the spread of the Gospel in the world and the birth of the first Christian community.

Today’s passage presents a charming picture of the way the community of Jerusalem lives. It is built around Mary and the Apostles after Pentecost. It is the reference point for all Christian communities.

The pillars on which it stands are listed in the first two verses of the reading (vv. 42-43): fidelity to catechesis, the communion of goods, the weekly celebration of the Eucharist (called “the breaking of the bread”), prayer in common. Let’s see in detail each of these characteristics.

First of all (daily) Catechesis

The Twelve do not behave like the rabbis: they do not merely repeat the interpretations of the ancients. They proclaim that the end time has come, showing how the scriptures and prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 4:33). They communicate the light they have received on Easter so that everyone may understand the meaning of the inexplicable and outrageous death of their Master. Even today, listening to the Word is the only sure foundation upon which the faith of the community must rest (Rom 10:14-17). Religious emotions, the sensations, the “personal revelations” are nothing more but fragile palliative, disappointing withdrawal.

The communion of goods

In many fields of morals, Christians follow principles and options different from the non-believers. When it comes to administering assets they behave generally like other people: trafficking, trading, accumulating as if the resurrection of Christ had nothing to do with the management of the economy. Who thinks and acts in this way is of course shocked by the radical change that is recorded in the community of Jerusalem as from Easter: Believers have everything in common (Acts 2:44); nobody says that what he has is his property (Acts 4:32); everything is distributed according to each one’s need (Acts 2:45; 4:35). It is not said that they are more generous than others, that they give more alms, but that they have renounced all their goods.

The realities of this world are not despised, but the voluntary renouncing to any selfish use of what one has is proposed.

The Christian ideal is not poverty, but a world in which “no one is poor” (Acts 4:34). Whoever believes that Jesus is resurrected will not submit to the slavery of having. Sharing shows the full availability to put oneself at the service of others.

Wealth is not a bad thing. Instead, the enrichment that leaves others in need is bad. Poverty is evil, for that it disappears in the kingdom of God. Poverty cannot exist in the community that practices sharing. Basileus, the father of the Church of the fourth century explained: “If everyone would take just enough

to his needs, leaving the superfluous to the indigent, no one would be rich and no one would be poor.” The Christians of Jerusalem led a life radically different from that of the surrounding environment. The joy, the simplicity of heart, the charity that they had towards each other attracted the sympathy of all the people. People wondered: where does the impulse to an extraordinary form of life come? The answer was: the resurrection of Christ. The new life of the community was evidence that Christ is alive.

There is an experience that people of every age are entitled to do: to meet a community of completely different people; a community that lives and proposes alternative values to those offered by the surrounding environment. The experience of the community of Jerusalem should not be literally applied to our community, otherwise, it would not only not solve the problems, but would create more. However, the detachment from the goods of this world is a prerequisite for anyone who believes in the risen Christ.

The breaking of the bread

The expression originally referred to the gesture of the householder who, at the beginning of the meal, took bread in his hand, pronounced the blessing, broke it, and distributed it to the diners (Acts 2:46). Soon it indicated the celebration of the Eucharist (Acts 20:7,11; 1 Cor 10:16) because the Lord had made this gesture at the Last Supper. In the primitive communities, it was preceded by a meal in common (1 Cor 11:17-34). Eucharist means thanksgiving. It is the apex of the life of the community. It's the time when in front of the broken bread—that repeats God's supreme act of love for people—the community is aware of all the gifts received from the Lord. It is seized with astonishment and admiration and with joy feels the need to praise him. It could use the words of the Psalmist: “Blessed be the Lord who has done wonders for me” (Ps 31:22). It could also exclaim with Jesus: “I give you praise, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the learned and the clever and revealed them to the little ones” (Lk 10:21-22).

A community that does not celebrate the Eucharist, which cannot express its thanksgiving in front of the sacrament, lacks an essential element of its life. Unfortunately, this happens in many Christian communities where, for lack of priests, only the bread of the Word is distributed. It is a substantial, sure food, but, if not followed by the “breaking of the Eucharistic bread” the celebration does not reach its apex.

Community prayer

The early Christians continued to behave as pious Jews: they frequented the temple (Acts 2:46) and recited psalms. Then they felt the need to translate into prayer the faith in the Risen One and the new relationship with God. Thus, using expressions captured on the lips of Jesus, they composed the Our Father, the model of every Christian prayer and the first songs to celebrate the Easter event.

The prayer made in solitude is good and necessary: Jesus commends it. “When you pray, go into your room and shut the door, pray to your Father in secret” (Mt 6:4). But the community is the “bride” which, as the maiden Israel, is loved with “an everlasting love” (Jer 31:3) by his Lord. For this reason, it feels the need to bring together all its members to raise “only one voice” its love song. In the context of this community prayer, Mary is remembered for the last time in the New Testament: “All one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brothers” (Acts 1:14).

A community based on these four pillars will do wonders, will place the foundations of a new humanity, will be the sign that in the world the Spirit of the Risen Lord is present and operates.

Second Reading: 1 Peter 1:3-9

We are in Rome in the year 80 a.C. and the Christians have just introduced the custom of administering baptisms during the Easter Vigil. In this liturgical context, the homily to the newly baptized is born. It is contained in the first letter of Peter which will accompany us in the next few Sundays. The term “dear” with which the preacher interjects his speech (1 Pt 2:11; 4:12) betrays his emotion in front of the new children of God. In his moving speech, he does not introduce theological disquisitions but congratulates neophytes (1 Pt 2:7). He reminds them that they were “born again, not of corruptible seed but from an immortal seed, that is, by the word of the living and eternal God” (1 Pt 1:23) and exposes the moral consequences that this new birth entails. His homily—we will see in the next few Sundays—is an uninterrupted succession of exhortations and imperatives.

This text was composed at a difficult time for the Christian community, especially those of Asia Minor. A real persecution was not unleashed against them, but the baptized were easily offended, discriminated against, unjustly convicted in the courts (vv. 6-7). The author invites them to reflect on the new life that God has given them in baptism, real life, even if it cannot be experienced with the senses (vv. 3-5).

From the awareness of having received a unique gift, joy, serenity and peace bloom. These inner dispositions liven up the Christian even in times when he must face tribulations, adversity, persecution (vv. 6-8).

How to interpret, in the light of God’s plan, the difficulties that many Christians of the late first century are encountering? The preacher uses a biblical image. The Lord is testing his elect, testing them like gold in the crucible (Wis 3:5-6). He is making them pass through the fire to purify them, as is done with silver (Zec 13:8-9).

Even the precious metals, in fact, need to be freed from the slag to achieve maximum brilliance.

The last part introduces the reading of the message that will be developed in the gospel “You love Christ, although you have not even seen him; and now, without seeing you continue to believe in him” (v. 8). The neophytes of Rome belong to the third generation of Christians. Though still relatively close to the events of Easter, they have not personally met Jesus of Nazareth. They live an experience of faith similar to ours. They believe the witnesses of the Risen One and meet the Risen Lord, like us, in the celebration of the Word and the “breaking of the bread”. They are blessed because, even though they have not seen him nor those who saw him, they continue to believe.

Gospel: John 20:19-31

Today’s passage is divided into two parts corresponding to the appearances of the Risen One. In the first (vv. 19-23), Jesus communicates his Spirit to his disciples. With that, he gives them the power to overcome the forces of evil. It is the same passage that we will find and comment on Pentecost. In the second (vv. 24-31), the famous episode of Thomas is told.

The doubt of this apostle became proverbial. It is often said when one shows some distrust “You’re unbelieving as Thomas.” Yet, in hindsight, he seems to have done nothing wrong: he only asked to see

what others had seen. Why demand only from him a faith based on the word?

But was Thomas really the only one to have doubts, while the other disciples would have easily and immediately believed in the Risen One? It does not seem that things went that way.

The Gospel of Mark says that Jesus appeared to the eleven “and rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they had not believed those who had seen him risen” (Mk 16:14). In Luke’s gospel, the risen Christ addresses the amazed and frightened apostles and asks: “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?” (Lk 24:38). In the last page of the Gospel of Matthew it even says that when Jesus appeared to the disciples on a mountain in Galilee (therefore long after the apparitions in Jerusalem), some still doubted (Mt 28:17).

All, therefore, doubted, not only the poor Thomas. How is it then that the evangelist John seems to want to focus on him the doubts that have gripped the others? Let us try to understand.

When John writes (about the year 95 a.C) Thomas was already dead for some time. The episode, therefore, is certainly reported not to put this apostle in a bad light. If his problems of faith were highlighted, the reason is another. The evangelist wants to respond to the questions and objections that Christians of his communities insistently raised. It is the third generation Christians, people who have not seen the Lord Jesus. Many of them do not even know any of the apostles. They find it hard to believe; they are struggling in the midst of many doubts; they would like to see, touch, and verify if the Lord is truly risen. They wonder: what are the reasons that may lead one to believe? Is it still possible for us to have the experience of the Risen Lord? Are there evidences that he is alive? How is it that he no longer appears? These are the questions that we ourselves ask today.

To them, Mark, Luke, and Matthew respond by saying that all the apostles had hesitations. They have not got it right away nor with ease to believe in the Risen One. The path of faith was long and tiring also for them, even though Jesus had given many signs that he was alive and entered into the glory of the Father.

The answer of John is different: he takes Thomas as a symbol of the difficulty that every disciple meets to come to believe. It is hard to know the reason why he chose this apostle. Perhaps because he had more difficulty or took more time than others to have faith.

That which John wants to teach the Christians of his communities (and us) is that the Risen One has a life that escapes our senses; a life that cannot be touched with bare hands or seen with the eyes. It can only be achieved through faith. This also applies to the apostles, who also have made a unique experience of the Risen Lord.

One cannot have faith in what is seen. You cannot have demonstrations, pieces of scientific evidence of the resurrection. If anyone wants to see, observe, touch, one must renounce his faith.

We do not say, “Blessed are those who have seen.” For Jesus, however, blessed are those who have not seen, not because it costs them more to believe and thus have greater merits. They are blessed because their faith is most genuine, and purest, indeed, is the only pure faith. Who sees has the certainty of the evidence, has irrefutable proof of a fact. Thomas appears two more times in John’s

Gospel and never cuts—we would say—a good figure. He always has difficulty in understanding, equivocating, misinterpreting the words and choices of the Master.

He speaks for the first time when he received the news of Lazarus' death. Jesus decides to go to Judea. Thomas thinks that following the Master means losing one's life. He does not understand that Jesus is the Lord of life. Dejected and disappointed, he exclaims: "Let us also go to die with him" (Jn 11:16).

During the last supper, Jesus talks about the path he is treading, a path that passes through death to be introduced into life. Thomas intervenes again: "Lord, we do not know where you're going and how can we know the way?" (Jn 14:5). He is full of perplexity, hesitation, and doubt, unable to accept what he does not understand. This is demonstrated for a third time in the episode narrated in today's passage.

It seems that John enjoys outlining in this way the figure of Thomas. In the end, he does him justice. He puts on his mouth the highest, the most sublime profession of faith. His words reflect the conclusion of the disciples' itinerary of faith.

At the beginning of the gospel, the first two apostles come to Jesus calling him Rabbi (Jn 1:38). It's the first step towards the understanding of the Master's identity. After a short time, Andrew, who has already figured out a lot more, says to his brother Simon: "We have found the Messiah" (Jn 1:41). Nathaniel intuitively recognizes with whom he deals and says to Jesus: "You are the Son of God" (Jn 1:49). The Samaritans recognize him as the Savior of the world (Jn 4:43), the people acknowledge him as the prophet (Jn 6:14), the man born blind proclaims him the Lord (Jn 9:38), for Pilate he is the King of the Jews (Jn 19:19). But it's Thomas who says the last word about the identity of Jesus. He calls him: "My Lord and my God." It is an expression that the Bible refers to YHWH (Ps 35:23). Thomas is, therefore, the first to recognize the divinity of Christ, the first who comes to understand what Jesus meant when he said: I and the Father are one (Jn 10:30).

The end of the passage (vv. 30-31) presents the reason why John wrote his book. He spoke of the "signs"—not all, but sufficient ones—for two reasons: to arouse or confirm the faith in Christ and why, through this faith, one comes to life.

The fourth evangelist calls miracles signs. Jesus did not perform them to impress whoever was there. He even had words of condemnation against anyone who did not believe unless he saw miracles (Jn 4:48). John does not tell them to impress his readers, to "show" the divine power of Jesus. The signs are not evidences, but revelations about the person, nature, and mission of Jesus. One who comes to believe in a robust and long-lasting way, from the material fact, rises to the reality that it indicates. It does not include the sign which, in the distribution of the loaves, does not capture that Jesus is the bread of life, or in the healing of the man born blind, does not recognize that Jesus is the light of the world, or in the resuscitation of Lazarus, does not see in Jesus the Lord of life.

In the epilog of the gospel, John uses the word signs in a broad sense: it means all the revelation of the person of Jesus, his acts of mercy (the healing, the multiplication of the loaves) and his words (Jn 12:37). Whoever reads his book and understands these signs clearly confronts the person of Jesus and is invited to make a choice. Whoever recognizes in him the Lord will opt for life and adhere to him.

Here is the only evidence that is offered to one who looks for reasons to believe: the same gospel. There the word of Christ resounds, and his person shines. There are no other proofs outside this same Word.

To understand, it is worthwhile to refer to what Jesus said in the parable of the Good Shepherd: “My sheep recognize my voice” (Jn 10:4-5,27). Apparitions are not necessary. In the gospel, the voice of the shepherd resonates. For the sheep that belongs to him, his unmistakable voice is enough to recognize and to draw it to him.

But where can one listen to this voice? Where does this word echo? Is it possible to repeat today the apostles’ experience on Easter day and “eight days later”? How?

We definitely have noticed that both apparitions take place on Sunday. We also have noticed that those who make the experience of the Risen One are the same (... one more, one less), that the Lord presents himself with the same words: “Peace be with you” and that, in both encounters, Jesus shows the marks of his passion. There would be other details, but these four are enough to help us answer the questions we posed.

The disciples are gathered in the house. The meeting to which John alludes is clearly that which happens on the day of the Lord. It’s the one in which every eighth day, the whole community is called for the celebration of the Eucharist. When all believers are gathered together, there appears the Risen One. He, by the mouth of the celebrant, greets the disciples and wishes, as on the evening of Easter, and eight days later: “Peace be with you.”

It is the time when Jesus manifests himself alive to the disciples. Who, like Thomas, deserts the meetings of the community, cannot make the experience of the Risen Lord (vv. 24-25). He cannot hear his greeting and his Word; he cannot accept his forgiveness and his peace (vv. 19,26,23), nor experience his joy (v. 20) and receive his Spirit (v. 22). Who, on the day of the Lord stays home, maybe to pray alone, can experience God, but not the Risen One, because he makes himself present where the community is gathered.

What does one, who does not meet the Risen One, do? Like Thomas, he will have need of evidences to believe, but he will never obtain evidences.

Contrary to what one sees depicted in the paintings of the artists, not even Thomas has put his hands into the wounds of the Lord. From the text, it does not appear that he has touched the Risen One. He also gets to pronounce his profession of faith after hearing the voice of the Risen One, along with his brothers and sisters of the community. And the ability to make this experience is offered to Christians of all times... every eight days.

- See more at: <http://bibleclaret.org/celebrating-the-word-of-god#sthash.sKSsptN6.dpuf>

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