

## Low Sunday 2020 - Behind Locked Doors

It is quite remarkable that today's liturgy reflects exactly our present situation under lockdown. We are behind closed doors because we are afraid, both of the virus and of law enforcement should we go out without an officially accepted reason. Before going onto this theme, I would like to give some commentary on the liturgy itself.

One embarrassing aspect of the Use of Sarum is the system of Sundays after Easter. These Sundays are only celebrated as ferial masses whilst the Sundays resume the full solemnity of Easter Sunday. Here we find a clash between the notion of Easter being fifty days long and the idea of the solemnity of the Octave being reduced from after Saturday *in Albis*. Of course, the *albis* refers to the white robe of the newly baptised and not the priest's vestments. The newly baptised were in their ordinary dress for the first time after the Easter Octave on Low Sunday.

Fr Hunwicke, in his blog Mutual Enrichment, contrasts the two notions of the Easter Octave or the fifty-day Easter. The modern Roman rite has followed the reasoning behind the Sarum Sundays after Easter, whilst the Gelasian and Gregorian Sacramentaries maintain the close of Easter on Easter Saturday. I quote from Fr Hunwicke:

*The Gregorian collect of that day talks about us having celebrated the Paschal Feasts (paschalia festa egimus), and Gelasianum numbers the following Sundays as 'after the close of Easter'.*

I have therefore allowed myself the latitude of celebrating Mass on this Sunday with the proper *Quasi modo* as in most other Latin rites including Rouen and York. Interestingly, the modern Roman rite has to some extent revived this tendency of making the first to fifth Sundays after Easter more "paschal". So did the *Book of Common Worship* in the Church of England. Cranmer's Prayer Book, inspired as it was by Sarum, did not resume the repeated Easter Sundays but rather used the Sunday Mass for weekdays.

We call this day Low Sunday because it comes immediately after the *Clausum Paschae*, the Close of Easter. These five Sundays after Easter come after the Easter Octave. We find

ourselves in the fifty days of Eastertide and no longer in Easter. It can seem something of an anticlimax after the intensity of Holy Week and the “brightness” of the Easter Octave. It seems as if it is “all over” for another year, even when we have passed through Lent and Passiontide – without which Easter would have no meaning. Similarly, Christmas has no meaning without Advent and the prophecies of the Old Testament.

I now come to the theme of the Gospel. It was the evening of the first day of the week, and the disciples had locked themselves in the building for fear of the very Jewish authorities who sent Christ to his death. Jesus came and stood among them and said ‘Peace be with you’. We follow the intensity of those events of the Triduum in the liturgy, but we can only begin to imagine what they must have experienced in “real time”. Their dreams were shattered. Jesus was dead. The body had disappeared from the sepulchre. They were annihilated by grief.

What do humans do in such circumstances, when we understand so little and we are afraid? We lock ourselves away. What are we doing right now? We are locked into our homes because there is a potentially lethal virus going from person to person like a common cold in winter. The authorities in our countries ordered us into lockdown on pain of getting into trouble with the police. The media assail us with a continuous loop of stories of death from suffocation as people wheeze and gasp through their ventilator tubes. Sometimes, young and healthy people are going the same way, afraid and alone. It has become frightening to go out, even just to run a very ordinary errand. When going to the familiar shops, we wear masks and imagine the virus getting onto our hands like some evil stain, which reminds us to wash our hands in alcohol gel. People in this country have not had such an experience since the Occupation from 1940 until the Liberation four years later. That time, the enemy was human and visible, involving very evil people, but now it is invisible and only visible using an electron microscope.

We shield ourselves from our suffering and the death of others far away in hospitals, care homes and private houses. This crisis seems to be a reflection of our own impenetrable walls and doors within our minds. Bereavement and suffering are like a feared tsunami, which is exactly the statistical image given to us to enable us to understand ideas like “flattening the curve”. We are reduced to fearful rage and grief, and struggle against our bounds. Revolts have begun in America, supported by President Trump despite the opposition of the elites. Where is the truth in all this? When Jesus passes through the locked door and bids us peace

and tells us not to be afraid, we must not forget his continuing presence with us in our age. Faith is difficult when we are fearful and doubtful. Franklin D. Roosevelt said in his inaugural address in 1933: the "*only thing we have to fear is fear itself*". Winston Churchill said in his turn "*Fear is a reaction. Courage is a decision*". Those two great statesmen understood human weakness and where strength lay.

The doubting Thomas shows the doubt and fear that resides in us all. Jesus offered the proof that he was the one who had been crucified. Thomas was immediately convinced and exclaimed "*My Lord and my God*", and then heard the familiar "*Blessed are they who have not seen but yet believe*". That is our experience, because the truth we believe in is far above sensory experience. It is a truth of another order, another world.

I too tend to err on the side of rationalism, coming as I do from a scientific family. This is where I learned everything from Romanticism, for creative imagination is reason in a different and higher world than empirical evidence to convince the mind through the senses. Doubt is natural, and helps us acquire a critical mind against the absurd, against the manipulations of corrupt religion as I would call it, especially the kind that requires the adepts to offer unconditional submission to usurped authority. Thomas was one of the greatest Apostles, and wrote the most profound Gospel which is not part of the Canon of Scripture. It was discovered near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in December 1945 and we are very fortunate to have it and the wisdom it contains. Thomas doubted until he saw the evidence, and then believed to the giving of his life in martyrdom. Perhaps his faith was all the more pure for it.

What is more corrosive to faith is fear. Many Christians were brought up never to doubt and to fear those who could punish them. We have taken refuge in our citadel, and our fear often takes the form of intolerance and irrational beliefs in things of this life that can easily be refuted. Thomas is told to go the extra mile when Jesus tells him that belief on the basis of evidence is good, but even better when we have no evidence other than a higher and transcendent truth. Peter was asked three times by Jesus "*Lovest thou me?*", and Peter was quite annoyed after the third time. Then came the order "*Feed my lambs, feed my sheep*". It seems that each Apostle receive his order that touched to the quick. Thomas came to faith because he had the courage to voice his doubt!

Our Anglican Tradition encourages us to doubt and express healthy scepticism with an open mind in matters of faith. Doubt is not the enemy of faith, but is the road to faith when we yearn for truth and seek it. Truth is not ours to own, but is offered to us as a gift. Doubt, not closed-minded denial, but genuine and sincere scepticism, spurs us to search and aspire in our movement of *Sehnsucht*. Doubt enables us to mature in our discovery of truth and the fact that we can only perceive it little by little, as “*through a glass darkly*” to follow the expression of St Paul. Beware of excessive certitude!

As for Jesus passing through the wall, I remember when I was in philosophy and attending a lecture in cosmology (philosophy of nature) which nowadays includes the science of quantum physics. The elderly Dominican explained the impenetrability of bodies to us. Two material bodies – rocks, pieces of metal, planets, anything, cannot occupy the same space. He asked us whether there were any exceptions. Some clever young seminarian would answer that there are two – Jesus walking through a closed door and in a Roman bus. Buses in Roman during the rush hour are so full of people that bodies are almost inside each other! The whole class would laugh. We are brought to modern quantum mechanics that go some way towards explaining the miracle (suspension of the “normal” laws of physics) – matter is only relative to consciousness and energy that constitutes sub-atomic particles. However it happened, it is another piece of evidence to show that Jesus not only rose from the dead but also could defy the physical laws that bind us common mortals. In the face of something so amazing, we hear: *Peace be with you.*

Let us be consoled. To be frank, I probably share the same fear as many others of the day we will be out of lockdown. We have been brainwashed into “social distancing”, and the term is unfortunate. We are asked to take physical precautions like keeping six feet between us, wearing a mask and regularly washing our hands to avoid catching the virus from other people, but those other people are not our *enemies*. Some are our friends or people we have worked with for years. We have got to reason our way out of irrational fear and face the world – because Jesus bids us peace and heals us from our fear and our sickness. Through his Resurrection, Jesus gives us new life – which casts out fear as light dissipates darkness. We will still bear the scars of our fear, as Léon Bloy said “*Souffrir passe, avoir souffert ne passe jamais*”. The pain of suffering goes away, but our experience of suffering remains with us for life. May his peace be with us as we prepare to face the world anew in faith and confidence.