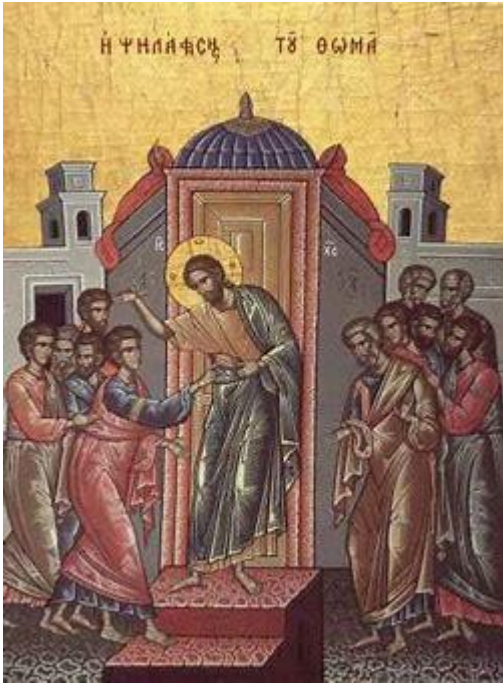


To Believe or Not to Believe

A Spiritual Reflection of Thomas Sunday (John 20:19-31)

Father Deacon Howard



The Gospel reading for the first Sunday after Easter tells of a noteworthy post resurrection event that occurred when Jesus first appeared to His disciples. To convey its importance this event is recounted by all four evangelists. In John's account we are told that in the late evening of the resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples as they gathered together behind locked doors. They were afraid of the Jewish authorities. Two times Jesus says "Peace be with you". The first time he showed them his hands and his side. It was to bring peace to the troubled minds of the disciples. Was this an apparition, a vision, the workings of troubled mind? The second time it was so that his disciples might carry the message of his resurrection to others. Jesus immediately says "As the Father sent me so I send you" (John 20-21).

John recalls that one of the twelve disciples, Thomas, was not there when Jesus came. When the others told him "We have seen the Lord" he doubted them (John 20-25). He had lost faith in Jesus when he was crucified. How was it possible that the Messiah could die in the most despicable way imagined - on a Cross, with common criminals as his companions. Thomas simply refused to accept the resurrection of Christ as true. "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails and thrust my hand into his side I will not believe" (John 20:25).

John the evangelist continues his narrative. "A week later Christ appears again to the disciples who have gathered in a closed upper room". The Apostles stand as witnesses to the Risen Lord. They witness Christ entering even though the doors were locked. Jesus turns to Thomas and shows him the nail holes in his hands and the wound in his side. He exhorts him not to be faithless but to be trusting. At which point, Thomas with profound faith acknowledges that Jesus is the Risen Christ.

You can't fault Thomas for his doubt. We live in an age of disbelief of spiritual and mystical reality. In this age of empiricism we say "show me the proof, where is the evidence. I can only function according to the scientific cycle where truth can be demonstrated, where there are sound irrefutable facts that can be tested".

Jesus does not blame Thomas for doubting. The disciples were no less to blame. They were told but they didn't believe until they saw the Risen Christ. Jesus allows for the fact that we humans need credible grounds for belief before we can make an act faith. Credible grounds come from a reasoned understanding

of the Resurrection Event. That's the role of Theology. The resurrection is an event which defies logic. It becomes reasonable when Christology - the study of Christ, thinks out the revelation.

Jesus is not opposed to reasoned arguments nor to debate, - listen to what he says to Thomas. "Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed." With these words he proclaims a special holiness of those who without debate believe as soon as they inwardly hear the word of Jesus.

This gospel reading for Thomas Sunday commemorates the triumph of faith over reason. In defense of his denial that Jesus was not resurrected Thomas reasoned "show me the proof, where is the evidence". Jesus invites him to "put your finger here and look at my hands; then reach out your hand and put it in my side. He tells Thomas: "Stop your doubting, and believe" Thomas answered him "My Lord and my God". To which Jesus replies, "Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me!" (John 20:27).

The gospel reading does more than to celebrate the victory of the gift of Faith over Reason. Faithfulness over Doubt! In one short sentence of John's long narrative he prepares us for the coming of the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. He informs us that at seeing the Lord the disciples were filled with joy. "Then Jesus breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). At which point they received the Holy Spirit even before Pentecost.

The Spirit was in them, but it was latent. It was there in potential. Pentecost will be its manifest coming; it's coming with power. Then the Spirit will come alive inside them and flow from them outwardly so that all non-believers can see the love of Jesus Christ as it is lived in those who believe in him. They will see how the Holy Spirit empowered them to do great things.

In the same way the Spirit may lie quietly in our soul without showing its working or without showing its power: the soul still needs the grace of Pentecost. And this grace can turn our disbelief into belief. Our distrust into trust! Our denial of Jesus into our acceptance of him as our Lord and personal Savior!

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