**SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER**

**24th April 2022**

**The Living One**

**First Reading Acts of the Apostles 5:12-16**

The ‘*Acts of the Apostles’* is Luke’s account of the growth of the Church immediately following the Resurrection which concluded his Gospel. The first momentous event in this new phase was Pentecost, witnessed by visitors from the known world (Acts 2;9-10) who would shortly return home with their stories. Thus at a stroke the new movement had universal publicity.

To-day’s passage recalls the first few weeks after Pentecost when Luke emphasises the power of the risen Christ at work in his followers. The Sunday Missal uses the Jerusalem Bible translation here and the phrase ‘*numbers ……. who came to believe in the Lord increased steadily*’ does not convey a key sense of the original.

The Greek literally says ‘more believers were added to the Lord’ The phrase "were added to the Lord" is very striking and deliberate. It means that new converts were brought into an already existing community. And the passive tense implies that it was God who added them. It was not the success of the Church and neither was it the new converts who took the initiative, but God who brought them into the redeemed community.

This says much about the DNA and authority of the Church and is demonstrated in the healing miracles which occurred even in Peter’s shadow. In Luke's gospel the working of miracles was seen as proof of Jesus’ authority and so also in Acts the miracles of the apostles similarly serve to give weight and authority to their message. The whole tenor of Acts is that the Church continued the work of Christ with his authority and power.

**Responsorial Psalm: 118:2-4, 22-27b**

Psalm 118, with its reference to the rejection of the stone and its subsequent use as the chief cornerstone, was perhaps the earliest Old Testament passage that the first Christians applied to Christ's death and resurrection.

**Second Reading Revelation of John 1:9-13 & 17-19**

The final New Testament writing (c. 95-100 A.D.) belongs to a genre that is unfamiliar to us, though not to its first readers. The author could have been the Apostle, John, who was reputed to have lived to a great age. But it is more likely to be a youthful disciple of his, also called John.

It was written to Christian congregations in western Turkey, or what the Romans called Achaia. It was written at a time when Christians were facing increasing hostility and ignorance from neighbours and officials. The author himself, had been exiled to a remote Mediterranean island, from which he wrote to the Churches that had been in his jurisdiction.

His purpose in writing was to stiffen the resolve of the members who faced powerful enemies. His method was to describe the conflict in mythological images, where right prevails and the faithful are victorious. They are headed up by the Son of Man, Jesus’ own title, aka the Lamb which was John’s chosen title. He led the cosmic battle against the Dragon variously called The Beast representing the Roman Empire.

A generation before (64 A.D.) Nero had falsely blamed Christians for arson, and this provided a template for later minor officials who needed scapegoats for their incompetence.

Greeks and Romans used letters to represent numbers so that any name can be added up to produce a total value. The values of the letters in the Beast’s name total 666. (Revelation 13;18.) However manuscripts vary in the number, which was altered to implicate local officials. The threats were occasionally systematic, but often spasmodic and varied according to local personalities and neighbours.

The section for this week reassures the seven Churches, (symbolised by the lamp-stands) of the presence of the risen Christ among them. He appears as a ‘Son of Man’ that is to say, a human being, but one in heaven. His victory over death is to be shared with all Christians who ‘patiently endure’ Victory is not the reward for endurance, but part of the same entity. Ordeal and sovereignty are the two sides of the same coin as is death and resurrection.

This may be a difficult idea to grasp, but it is an important aspect of the author’s thinking which is also found in the fourth Gospel (e.g. John 12;23-26 & 13;31) but not with other writers (e.g. Luke 24;26 & 1 Peter 1;10-12). It is such links as these that illustrate the close connections between the Gospel and Apocalypse and the difference between them and the Synoptics.

**Gospel John 20:19-31**

This, the traditional gospel for this Sunday, describes two appearances: to the disciples. One on Easter evening, which appears in various forms in Matthew, Luke, and John (20;19-23) and to Thomas a week later, (20;24-29) which is unique to John.

Similar stories set during the ministry of Jesus may have arisen arise from the same incidents and the minor differences can often be accounted for quite simply. It is different with the stories of the resurrection. With these, each has to be treated as a unique experience often to one or two disciples and never to a non-believer. (With the possible exception of Paul on the road to Damascus who became a disciple afterwards.)

The risen Christ appears to his disciples only to entrust them with a mission. The mission is nothing more or less than to continue the mission he received from the Father and, indeed, accomplished by his death and resurrection: the reconciliation of humanity with their Father.

He greeted his disciples with the common Jewish salutation 'Peace be with you.' For the Jew, peace was a grace that came from God, establishing good relations with him and also with his neighbour. It was not a peace that the world would understand. (John 14:27). Now as glorified Lord he communicates his peace to his disciples and thus binds them to himself and to one another in a union of love and harmony.

At the heart of this ministry was the forgiveness of sins, and in to-day’s story, Jesus transfers the necessary authority to proclaim this to the Apostles. This authority has been understood to justify the practice of auricular confession which is to read the words having in mind much later situations. It is probably fair to say that originally the incident recalls Jesus commissioning his successors in more general terms. This would be to endow the Church to preach the Gospel, without detailing who could exercise this power or how it should be exercised.

What one can confidently say is that the Church's use of the sacrament of reconciliation is one legitimate way of exercising the power over sin given by the risen Jesus to his disciples in general.

The second episode of Thomas (vv. 24-29) is of great importance for the author and is actually the climax of the Gospel. (Chapter 21 is a later appendix). The disciple, Thomas, passes from scepticism to belief. The last word of the gospel is a full-blooded profession of faith.

Thomas refuses to accept the word of the other disciples and insists on having concrete proof of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus (vv. 24-25). In the event, he comes to belief without a need for the crude verification he seemed to demand (20:25,27-28). It is enough to have seen (v. 29, see vv. 20,25). It is unfortunate that Thomas has been remembered for his stubbornness -'doubting Thomas.' He ought rather to have been remembered for the most forthright confession of faith in the gospels: 'My Lord and my God.'

It is the highest Christological attribution in the New Testament: Jesus is addressed by Christians in the same terms that Israel had used to address Yahweh. Thomas' confession is an acknowledgment of the God revealed in Jesus. It is quite likely that it was a form of creed used in the author’s Church.

The author then adds a detail comment that is crucial for all disciples of the risen Lord - 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe' (20:29).

The evangelist is writing for the first generation that had not 'seen' the Lord. He presents Thomas as being a bridge between the Apostolic age and the next generation of Christians. They share the same close relationship with the Lord through their common faith, though he be no longer visible. It is the tranquil assurance of union with him.