

EASTER 2 – DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY

May 1st, 2011

*A sermon preached by Fr. John-Francis Friendship SCP
at S. Andrew's Church, Romford*

INTRODUCTION

'An Englishman's home is his castle' is a dictum that resonates deeply in our psyche and every intrusion into a home stirs up deep emotional feelings of outrage and violation. Even our island shores seem to parallel this sense of being enclosed in a space that has been a safe-haven for a thousand years.

So the scene we heard of in today's gospel – of a room locked for fear of intruders – echoes this feeling of needing a safe space. There is a natural urge in all of us to lock ourselves away in a place. But no where is safe – ultimately. No matter how good the locks, strong the bars or modern the alarm, if sufficiently determined to break in and enter, they will.

PRISONS

One of the things Suzanne and I have in common is that we have spent time in prison. For four years I was a chaplain in Winson Green Prison in Birmingham and one of the most terrible things about any prison is that sense of non-freedom which takes from those imprisoned a fundamental part of their humanity. So not only are people locked behind bars but they live behind masks, putting up images of hard, macho-men when often there is a frightened child lurking near the surface.

And, to some extent, that of course is true for many of us. 'Through the unknown, remembered gate' of our childhood lie those who wait to find us out, to scold, reprimand or even hurt us. So, as St. John says of those first disciples, the doors of our personal house are locked for fear...

But he then goes on to identify the way through the predicament: '*Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you".*' He came *through* the defences. He didn't rise above them or get round them but he came through them and gave that first message to the church, 'Peace'. He didn't rescue them but, in the midst of their fear he breathed peace. Not peace as the world might understand it – the absence of war or strife or fear, but a peace that concerns right relationships – with God first, then each other. Jesus stands in the centre of our fear, in that prison barred to the forces of chaos, with this word, 'peace'. And he shows them the wounds of his own struggle with chaos and death.

THE RAISING OF ADAM

For me the image that best reveals this gift of God is the orthodox icon of the resurrection where Christ descends into the darkness of Sheol – death – breaking down the prison doors, releasing the bars and the locks and reaches out into the deepest place of un-freedom to liberate Adam and Eve, those representative, archetypal figures of humanity. And, surrounding them are figures from Israel's history – Abraham, Solomon and David, Abel and John Baptist. For we are not saved alone but in company: it is through our right relationships with God and each other that we enter into the freedom and glory of resurrection life.

And, as if to reinforce this message (and that is what he is doing) Jesus' first gift to his disciples is that very gift they themselves had experienced, the freedom that comes through forgiveness: *"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."* (John 20: 23)

How true.

Of course it needs to be said that forgiveness of sins does not mean that one is absolved of the *consequence* of wrong-doing. Far from it. We all carry such a load of sin and guilt that this first gift of Christ to the church is *so* important. And the Church of England has continued to offer this gift in a sacramental way, a way so often neglected and ignored. For almost 150 years this church has stood as a witness to the catholic faith of the Church of England and that faith includes the privilege of being able to make one's confession. As I have said before, coming to a priest and offloading all one's sins to another human being (under the 'seal' of confidentiality of the confessional) is a remarkable experience.

As Anglican's all may, none must but some should make use of the Sacrament. Yet how many of those of us who need to do 'unload', shed, of the burden of our sins of thought, word – and deed. Of course we are not absolved from the consequences of our behaviour, and there is always a simple penance to undertake after making one's confession. Penitence means that I own my sin, promise (by the grace of God) not to sin again, accept my guilt and be ready to make amends in whatever way is appropriate. Confessing one's sins is not about having it all swept under the carpet. It's about being honest, to another and, as importantly, to myself.

LIBERATION THROUGH RESURRECTION

If we are experiencing the freedom of resurrection or, rather, if we want to live resurrection lives, then it only works if you are prepared to offer it as a gift to others. And this gift of human freedom lies at the heart of our faith for to be fully human means to live and respond to the other as free men and women.

But it is a gift we can know only if it is shared, for it is not a private matter: my freedom, my liberation, is only possible in union with yours. Pope John XXIII once said: *"as long as there is one person behind bars, I myself am not free."*

How true that is as well.

'Forgive our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.'

As long as I cannot forgive, I am not free.

The reality of God's forgiveness is rooted in his freedom to forgive. Or, to put it another way, God can only be God because he forgives. Not 'can forgive' or 'might forgive' or 'forgives conditionally'. But, like his love his forgiveness is unconditional. His forgiveness is, but is ours?

CONCLUSION

At the end of our gospel reading St. John tells us that he wrote of these things *'so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.'* (20:31) For St. John, seeing and believing are inseparable. If you see that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, you will believe. There's a story told of a priest in Africa who was translating St. John's Gospel into the local dialect. There were many problems in finding the right words translate some of the English words, one such being to 'believe'. There was no exact word in

the dialect. So he asked one of the locals for help and, after hearing the priest explain what the word meant, the man said – “To believe means to *listen with the heart.*” And that requires a heart open - free enough - to listen.

Each of us has had, in whatever way, an encounter with Jesus, whether we recognise that or not. Whether we have ‘seen’ him or not. The question for each of us is, how has my heart responded to Jesus? Not just emotionally, but in the depths of my being. Many saw Jesus in the flesh, and made no response. Thomas saw with the eye of his heart, and it led him to exclaim, “*My Lord, and my God!*” Many of us recognise where we have gone wrong in life, but it makes little impression on us – we do not recognise, in the depths of our heart our need for forgiveness and repentance. But this is the faith we declare and into which we are about to baptise Viktor. A faith which has, at its heart, a message of freedom not to live life as we please but to live as fully human-beings whose true identity is to be found through our relationship with the risen Christ.

Amen.