

## Homily for The Second Sunday of Easter 2009 (Year B )

"This is the victory over the world - our faith".

In St. John's account of the Last Supper Jesus tells his disciples "In the world you will have hardship, but be courageous: I have conquered the world" (John 16.33). This is echoed in the words of today's second reading. But it is important to be clear about what all this means; there is nothing wrong with the world that we live in, with all this that is around us, with God's creation. That is not what needs to be conquered. What needs to be conquered is what we might call worldliness, an approach to life that says this world is all there is, and that we had better get as much out of it as we can, as quickly as we can. The world that was in conflict with Jesus is a way of living that is governed by sin and death. The person who acts as if the pursuit of their own ends, their own pleasure, their own comfort, this is a citizen of 'the world' in the sense that St. John uses it. The world which so concerns Jesus is really a way of life that is based on the idea that nothing has any meaning unless I choose to give it meaning; nothing has any value unless I choose to give it value. I am the creator of truth, I am in control. I, in fact, am God. This is a world where human beings say 'we will not be tied down by anybody else, we will decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong'. This seems to promise freedom: we don't need to be constrained by other people's ideas, by the traditional way of doing things, we can start with a blank canvas. But that idea of freedom is an illusory one, because no sooner have I put all my ideas into practice than someone else comes along with different ideas, and there is conflict. Even if that conflict is resolved, another one will begin soon enough. The world that is based on human beings creating for themselves meaning and values always becomes a battleground, the war of all against all. How many revolutions have begun with high sounding ideas of peace and justice for all, only to descend into a new oppression, simply a different sort of dictatorship, because the revolutionaries are so keen to promote change when they are trying to gain power, but so resistant to change once they are in the driving seat.

The idea that human beings can decide for themselves what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong, is seductive; but because it always sets people against each other, even to the extent of using violence to defend their idea or their interests against those of others, it is always governed in the end by sin and by death.

So the message that Jesus had for his disciples was that as long as they were interacting with people who lived on the principle that mankind can make his own rules, they will always find themselves in conflict. That had been his own experience in Jerusalem, and the experience will be shared by his first followers, and by people ever since. But this need not be the last word. "This is the victory over the world - our faith". Jesus has confronted the world governed by sin and death, and the sin that crucified him failed to silence him, just as did his death on a cross. He has faced sin and death, and shown that in the end they are without power. If we want to be able to see 'the world' in the sense in which it is used here, that mindset that sets an invented version of the truth against the real truth that is deeply embedded in the created world, if we want to see it for the powerless and destructive sham that it really is, the key which unlocks this vision is faith in Jesus Christ. In my mind I make a decision, I will live my life under the guidance of the resurrection of Jesus. Whenever the lure of the fake world sounds tempting, I will remind myself that it inevitably leads to conflict

with real, authentic human life, and that in the end it can only be destructive. I am faced with a choice - in fact I am faced with dozens of choices, every day: will I do things my way, or will I do them God's way. If I do them my way I know that I will always make choices in life that are tainted by the tendency to choose what I want, what will suit me best, rather than necessarily to do what is really right.

In this light it is very interesting to look at the wounds of Christ in the Gospel reading. Jesus comes, mysteriously, into the locked room and says "peace be with you"; he shows the disciples his wounds, then he says again "peace be with you". He is saying to them that these wounds, which at first appeared to be a sign of defeat and failure, are in fact a sign of triumph. Sin and death have done their worst, and failed. From now on the wounds of Christ will always be a reminder that 'the world' - a way of life based on pleasing myself, will always fail when it comes into contact with a way of life that is based on eternal truths. When Thomas is told that the others have seen the Lord he refuses to believe. He doesn't insist on seeing the Lord's face; he doesn't insist on hearing his voice. What will persuade Thomas is the wounds. They are the real centre of today's gospel; they are not scars, they are trophies. They say, loud and clear, that whatever may happen along the way, in the end sin and death are weak and powerless. It is this knowledge which sustains us and encourages us to stay true to what we know to be right, in spite of opposition or criticism. It is the wounds of Christ that put it beyond doubt that 'the world' has been defeated, and it is our decision to put our trust in the wounded Christ, to make him the touchstone of truth and virtue, that is to say our faith, that makes us victorious. As long as we stay close to those wounds, we remain untouched by the sinful will to dominate and to impose our selves onto other people. They are precious indeed.