

Homily: April 7, 2024

By Fr. Virgil Petermeier, osc

We celebrate this Second Sunday of Easter, or the eighth of fifty Easters. Since 2000, the Catholic church has called this Sunday Divine Mercy Sunday, and appropriately so. God resurrected back into a humanity that had killed him. The resurrected Christ proclaimed peace and forgiveness to his disciples who only days before that first Easter, had abandoned Jesus.

We acknowledge and celebrate God's incredibly great mercy by committing ourselves to peace through forgiveness as we renew our baptismal commitment to the King of Mercy in the ritual sprinkling of holy water.

As I read this Gospel several days ago, I was struck anew by the last sentence, "Through this belief [that Jesus is the Christ] you may have life in his **name**" (Jn 20:31b). When I first read that sentence, I wondered how belief in Jesus Christ brings life. I was certain that this question of how belief gives us life is a crucial and essential for us Christians.

Belief and knowing or understanding are two different things. When Jesus told his betraying apostles, "Peace be with you," they must have felt stunned, happy, wondering, even doubting. They had run from him and now he greets them with "Peace." On top of that, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on them and tells them, "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them. . ." There's no way they could possibly understand all that was happening right before their eyes. How does forgiveness really work? How's possible that Jesus is wishing us peace? They could not possibly understand it all.

We know that the apostles eventually came to believe Jesus' forgiveness, so much so, that they began to proclaim him openly, even though threatened, jailed, and flogged. They lived no longer in fear. They experienced a new life of boldness and deepened belief. Yes, their belief gave them new life.

We just heard the second answer about the connection between belief and new life in the first reading. The first Christian community was willing to share what they had with those in need, so much so that there finally was "no needy person among them." The apostles and the first Christians felt God was so good to them, so merciful, that they burst into God's gear of being good and merciful to one another. Their belief in Jesus Christ gave birth to a new communal and guaranteed life for the needy among them.

I gained another insight into the connection between belief and life about 10 years ago when I saw the movie, "Temple Grandin." Temple Grandin is now a 45-year-old autistic

woman traveling the world as a motivational speaker. I thought of her as I read about the apostles behind locked doors. For autistic Temple Grandin, doors, literally and figuratively, are things you have to walk through to make progress. She believed opening a challenging door would open something new and better for her and others.

The connection between belief and life is super important. When we no longer believe in a life-giving way, we become cynical or settle for merely entertaining ourselves with shallow stuff like our appearance of success, winning, impressing others, and fitting in with the right physique, clothing, cars, and lots of distractive entertainment. All these things never really satisfy nor bring true happiness. They can lead one to the question: "Is this all there is?" When life feels too dull, futile, and dissatisfying, then depression and loneliness can take over. And for some people, suicide may become the next best exit from painful dissatisfaction and disappointment in life. Hopelessness, the opposite of life-giving belief, does not bring life but rather death.

Thoughts matter, and beliefs are types of thoughts. If I believe pessimistically that I am not worth anybody's attention, let alone God's, I may fall into a deep hole of worthlessness and hopelessness. Perhaps I soothe myself with drugs, alcohol, or other pacifiers. But these will not and cannot provide true peace nor solve my misguided and bad beliefs about myself, others, and my life.

On the other hand, if I believe positively, and more especially, in a specifically Christian way that there is no sin God can't and won't forgive, I will be free of enormous burdens of my heart. If I believe that God, through Jesus, loves me deeply, I will have a new life with abundant energy and spirit to do lots of good. That's how God resurrects you and me from the tomb of bad belief and gives you and me new life in Jesus. Jesus firmly believed God loved him, ever since that famous baptismal proclamation from the sky, "You are my beloved Son." Jesus knew that nothing could separate him from his God of love, even if he died.

So I close with today's last Gospel words, "Through this belief [that Jesus is the Christ/the Savior] you may have life in his **name**" (Jn 20:31b).

((sing: ALLELUIA -- ALLELUIA))