

Divine Mercy Sunday (Second Sunday of Easter), B – April 7, 2024 – Fr. Bryan W. Jerabek  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 7:15, 8:30, and 11:00am Sunday Masses – 750 words

Our readings on this Divine Mercy Sunday provide something of a grab-bag of themes that highlight different angles of the Lord’s great mercy. For example, the scene from the Acts of the Apostles in the first reading, sometimes misinterpreted as a sort of paleo-communism, in fact depicts a situation that arose organically for a time in the early Church, where the disciples freely divided up their possessions and provided for each other’s needs. Being that the community “was of one heart and one mind” – a state of affairs that sadly has not persisted down through the ages – they effectively practiced the corporal and spiritual works of mercy in a consistent and pristine way for a while. Here we see mercy in action on a community level, and are challenged to recall that we are still called to practice the works of mercy today.

John’s reference to “water and blood” in the second reading, on one level, points to what he would record in his own gospel: namely, how the soldier pierced Christ’s side with a lance and out flowed water and blood. This was the moment when Jesus was shown to be the new Temple, the new locus of true worship and its fruits – namely of mercy. For the great memory of the old temple in scripture was of water and blood draining out its side, as the blood of the sacrifices was washed away from the sanctuary each day – those sacrifices that were meant to reconcile man to God. So Christ on the cross is revealed as the one who reconciles man to God, the source of all mercy. And the Church has always understood the water and blood as referring to her sacramental life – especially baptism, confession, and Eucharist.

Thus far, then, we have mercy’s source as being in Christ, and a glimpse of how it could be lived out in an ideal community – in any case, we can learn from that ideal community how we are called to live now in these non-ideal times: by showing mercy to others. But the gospel reading shows us how God’s mercy is applied to us individually, and the structure of John’s Gospel reveals to us something very interesting in this connection as well. Here we are just before the end of his gospel; Thomas has just confessed that Christ was the Son of God, after seeing his pierced side. In the lines that immediately precede, Jesus revealed the sacrament of confession to his apostles. But shortly after the beginning of John’s gospel, there was the episode of Christ’s baptism and the revelation that he was the Son of God also.

Yes, John’s gospel begins and ends with baptism and confession, respectively – and both of these, connected with our Lord Jesus Christ. Through both sacraments, God’s mercy is applied to us. Through baptism, the guilt of Original Sin is washed away – and for those baptized later, after the age of reason, any actual sins they committed are forgiven also. And through confession of our sins to a priest, the sins we commit after baptism are forgiven, too; as I’ve said before, it’s as if the waters of our baptism are stirred up again, refreshing and restoring us. Just as St. John teaches in one of his letters that we are able to love because God has first loved us, so also we deduce from his writings that we are able to show mercy to others because God has first showed us mercy. That mercy has come to us through Jesus Christ.

These readings are very rich, whether considered individually or taken together, and many more sermons could be given on them. We have just now barely touched the surface. But already an important lesson emerges, which is that God wants to be merciful to us through his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ – which he does in the first place through his Church’s sacraments. Moreover, he wants us to live out that mercy by sharing it with others. Now, other passages of scripture that we’ve heard before echo anew in our hearts, such as “Be merciful, as your Father is merciful” – or, “Go, and do likewise”. Are we who have already been baptized regularly receiving the gift of God’s mercy through confession? And are we regularly looking for ways to be merciful to others?

We are thus challenged anew, as we prepare to meet the Lord Jesus, the source of all mercy, here in the Holy Eucharist in just a few moments.