

## 2 Easter 2018 (Divine Mercy Sunday)

Recently I came across this short narrative poem which I found quite striking. It is by an English poet called Dorothea Ruth Etchells who was born in 1931. She was a college principal and spent most of her working life in the University of Durham. She died in 2012. It's called *The Judas Tree*:

In Hell there grew a Judas Tree  
Where Judas hanged and died  
Because he could not bear to see  
His Master crucified.

Our Lord descended into Hell  
And found his Judas there  
Forever hanging on the tree  
grown from his own despair.

So Jesus cut his Judas down  
and took him in his arms.  
'It was for this I came' he said  
'And not to do you harm.

My Father gave me twelve good men  
And all of them I kept  
Though one denied, and one betrayed,  
Some fled, and others slept.

In three days time I must return  
To make the others glad  
But first I had to come to Hell  
and share the death you had.

My tree will grow in place of yours  
Its roots lie here as well.  
There is no final victory  
without this soul from Hell'.

So when we all condemned him  
As of every traitor worst  
Remember that of all his men  
Our Lord forgave him first.

Of course, that story is not to be found in any of the Gospels.

But I think the poem expresses the essence of the Gospel which above all else is a message of Divine Mercy, of the Forgiving nature of God, made manifest in Jesus.

It's the teaching of this ancient Icon which depicts the descent of Jesus into Hell - a facet of our faith that we declare in the Apostles Creed, and which the church traditionally contemplates on Holy Saturday.

In the Gospel story of Judas we hear clearly enough about his remorse, and how he returns to the Sanhedrin and admits that he has 'betrayed innocent blood', but he is paid no heed. It is then, the Gospel says, that he went out and hanged himself. Evidently he feels he is **beyond redemption**.

The Gospel does relate, in detail, the story of another person, whom Jesus had liberated from 'seven devils' - Mary Magdalen. As is related by St John, she is the first to encounter the Risen Lord in the garden which surrounds his tomb.

That scenario puts us in mind of another woman, the one caught in the very act of adultery who is about to be stoned to death, when Jesus enters the dire situation. No doubt we can all remember his words to the vengeful crowd: *Let him who is without sin cast the first stone* - and how they all move away, one by one, beginning with the eldest. And then Jesus' words to the woman: *Has no-one condemned you?* And her reply: *No one, Lord.* And his encouraging response: *Neither do I condemn you, but go now and sin no more.* (John 8:1-11)

Or we might think of Zaccheus, the greedy, cheating little tax collector who was so moved by Jesus wish to be with him, in his very house, that he completely changed his disposition and behaviour pledging to give half of his possessions to the poor, and if he had cheated anyone to repay four times the amount. (Luke 19:1-10)

Or we could recall to mind the woman, *who had a bad name in the town*, who gate-crashed the Pharisee's feast and anointed Jesus' feet with precious ointment and with her tears. Of her Jesus said: *Her sins, her many sins, must have been forgiven her, or she would not have shown such great love.* (Luke 7:36-50)

Or remember Peter, who denied three times that he even knew Jesus but was three times entrusted by the risen Lord with the leadership of the infant church. Peter himself is confident of Jesus' perception of where his heart lies: *Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you.* (John 21:17)

This is the underlying theme of all the Gospels, their basic and essential message, and their invitation or challenge to us. To trust in God's forgiveness, and to emulate that largeness of heart to the best of our ability.

From time to time in the history of the Church this teaching has to be re-iterated, given fresh emphasis. Usually this is when we have become guilt-ridden, afraid of our sinfulness and of its consequences; or, conversely, when we are not as conscious of the generosity of God's love for us as we should be. In other words when we are being driven by either by fear, or have become lazy and unresponsive to God's expectations of us.

For such reasons devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was promoted by St Margaret Mary Alacoque in 17th century France, but before her by many other holy men and women down the centuries - including Saints Gertrude, Mechtilde, Francis de Sales, John Eudes and others besides - from ancient times.

More recently the revelations of 'Divine Mercy' to the Polish religious Sister - now canonised Saint - Faustina have given rise to the popular Devotion to Jesus under that title, and to the naming - by St Pope John Paul II - of this, the Second Sunday of Easter, as 'Divine Mercy Sunday'.

Today's Mass focuses on the Gospel story of the appearance of the Risen Jesus to the disciples gathered together in the Upper Room. To them his words are of reassurance and forgiveness which he **repeats**: *Peace be with you.*

Then comes the challenge to them - **and to us**:

*Receive the Holy Spirit.*

*For those whose sins you forgive they are forgiven.*

*For those whose sins you retain they are retained.* (John 20:19-23)

Clearly, the redemption of the human race, its radical renewal, depends on two realities which are interconnected:

The Gift of God's Holy Spirit to empower us;

and our own willingness to forgive one another.

Without these two graces humanity will forever stay the same:

*Forever hanging from the tree grown from our own despair.*