

For many years now I have been an avid reader of the Sunderland Echo, a reliable source of impeccable local information. Well, that's what I thought until recently when a map they published had 'Sunderland' where Middlesbrough is, and vice versa!

Although I have not lost any enthusiasm for the paper, I have noticed that over recent years my particular interests have altered somewhat. There was a time when I was still in 'active' ministry, that I found my most careful reading was in the Family Announcements—births, marriages and deaths—also known as hatch, match and dispatch. Professionally, as it were, it has been a useful guarantee that I had noted down from the undertaker's phone call the right information about forthcoming funerals. But nowadays primarily it is always with a degree of relief that I fail to see my own name among the death notices!

Anyway, with my confessed careful perusal of the Family Announcement page you will understand my surprise two or three years ago at the beginning of April when this unusual notice appeared on that page for four consecutive days:

*Say this prayer
6 times a day for 9 days
May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be
praised, loved, adored and glorified
throughout the whole world
now and for ever.
This novena never fails.*

I have some pity for the compositor of the page—what heading should he put this notice under? I don't know how much time he took over deciding the issue, but it was published under the title 'Thank You'.

Well, I know that we have quite some time to go before we get to the festival of the Sacred Heart, but this notice is a timely reminder of a commemoration that in recent years has been attached to this Sunday at the end of the Easter Octave. The Sunday after Easter used to be known as Low Sunday, but now has the title Divine Mercy Sunday, and at the centre of its celebration is the Sacred Heart of Jesus, pierced by the soldier's lance, and pouring out a stream of water and blood, symbolic of baptism and the eucharist. Many churches now have a picture of the Divine Mercy showing the merciful stream flowing from Jesus' Sacred Heart and with the words underneath which are the kind of motto of this feast—'Jesus I trust in you.'

This Sunday has attracted its specific title from the visions of a Polish nun called Saint Faustina living between the two world wars of the last century. The Polish Pope, John Paul II was very much attracted to her message, and promoted the keeping of this festival, and in a way he gave it his final endorsement by dying on Easter Saturday, the eve of Divine Mercy Sunday in 2005.

The basic message of this Sunday is that we should be confident to ask for and receive the mercy of God; that we should trust in Christ's abundant mercy; and that we should show that mercy to others and act as conduits for God's mercy towards them. And all of this in the context of the Easter truths we celebrate, especially on this last day of the Octave of the resurrection.

That's all a bit theoretical and wordy, but I believe that the lesson of Divine Mercy Sunday is in fact well illustrated in our Gospel this Sunday, the convincing of Thomas. Now I have a soft spot for Thomas, not least because he was the patron of my title parish. I think he is much maligned by that description of Doubting Thomas—would you have believed what the disciples had said to you? Would we not all have demanded some kind of physical evidence ourselves? After all, they had seen him, or so they said; Thomas only had their word to rely on.

Thomas, quite unwittingly, went to the heart of things—not only did he want to see and touch the nail prints which in themselves would be compulsive identifying evidence, but he wanted to put his hand in the wound leading to Jesus' heart, the wound that punctured that heart and from which that double fountain of water and blood had flowed.

But, when Jesus did appear to Thomas on the following Sunday, Thomas was not, of course, the first person to see the risen Jesus. That prize, if you like, according to John's gospel goes to Mary Magdalene. You'll remember that in the gloom of early dawn she thought he was the gardener, and when he revealed himself, she then recognised him as 'Rabbuni', Master. But that acknowledgement was no more than what he had been to her over the previous three years.

Then Jesus had appeared to the disciples later that same day, the first Easter Day, when Thomas was absent. True, they all recognised him to be the Jesus they knew and loved, and, as John says *The disciples were filled with joy when they saw the Lord*. But again, the title – the Lord - was no different from what they had been used to using in his earthly ministry.

It took Thomas reaching out to place his hand in the wound in the side of Jesus,

the source of mercy and the sacraments of the Church, to be the first to really see who Jesus in truth was: *My Lord and my God*. Blessed Thomas is the first of the Church to acknowledge the risen Jesus as merciful God—an enormous leap forward in the faith of the Church, all down to his reaching out to touch and trust that this was the Divine Mercy among his people. His simple action leads to an understanding which is far, far more profound than simply ‘Fancy that, it really is Jesus’, as the others had said. For Thomas the resurrected Jesus is ‘My Lord and my God’.

Thomas reaches out to touch the Sacred Heart of Divine Mercy and expresses his trust in that source of mercy. In a short phrase as S Faustina says: ‘Jesus, I trust in you.’

*May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be
praised, loved, adored and glorified
throughout the whole world
now and for ever.*

For that Heart is full of love for humankind, full of divine mercy for those who believe him to be their Lord and God.