

Fr Robin Burgess writes

In 1999 I joined a group making a pilgrimage-cum-holiday to Poland. One of the sights that stays in my memory most is the salt mines of Wieliczka near the ancient city of Krakow. The mines cover a large area, in which the miners dug out underground chambers, with chapels, altars, statues, even a chandelier - all skillfully made out of salt and very attractive. It is a remarkable example of human ingenuity and creative art applied in the most unlikely circumstances, the sort of thing that gives one hope that we can prevail and come through difficulties and even make something beautiful and splendid out of them.

We can hope that this will be the case with the current Coronavirus crisis, even though the more it goes on, the more strange and unaccountable it seems. How did we get into this pass? How and when are we going to get out of it? One of the prayers on Easter Day speaks of being "exultant with paschal gladness," but most of us probably find it hard to feel that gladness, being deprived as we are of everything in the Church that helps us to celebrate Easter and for the time being, being unable to do anything but endure that loss.

Our visit to Poland occurred during one of Pope John Paul's visits to his homeland. On the last Sunday we were there, he led a big open-air Mass in the centre of Warsaw in which he canonised over a hundred Polish martyrs of the war years. Earlier we had visited the national shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa and the parish in Krakow where Sr. Faustina lived. The Divine Mercy Devotion which she originated is now well known to many, as is the image of Christ made from her vision with the words: Jesus, I trust in you.

Pope John Paul designated the 2nd Sunday of Easter as Divine Mercy Sunday, but it retains the traditional Gospel reading for the day from St. John. On the evening of the first Easter Day the disciples gathered behind locked doors. Some of them had been at the empty tomb, but they were still in a state of shock and disbelief after seeing Jesus

die on the cross and not yet knowing what to make of the absence of his body. And there Jesus was among them, pronouncing his peace to them. Three times in this reading he says, 'Peace be with you.'

Thomas (later known as Doubting Thomas) was not there on that occasion, but was with the others the following week when Jesus appeared again and gave them his peace. To dispel his doubts Jesus bids Thomas to touch his body and feel the mark of his wounds. It is this touching that convinces Thomas that it really is Jesus who died who is alive again, and he gives us what has become a familiar affirmation of faith, 'My Lord and my God.'

I have heard several comments this last week on how often in the Gospels Jesus uses physical touch as a means of conveying God's healing and consolation - and how ironic it is that the Church today is deprived of using this simple but powerful gesture. We want to reach out, touch and embrace, but we know we cannot because it might even be dangerous. How extraordinary and abnormal our present condition is! How we long to return to normality!

It is easy to say we can learn from our situation, our waiting in deprivation, and use it to deepen our faith, and we can be rather glib in saying that. People have said to me, as they might have to you, that God will never give you more suffering than you can bear. My answer to that is, I would prefer it if he did not give me any at all! But I do not believe God operates in that way: he does not arrange for us to have a dose of illness, of viruses or cancer, or any other misfortune, just to test us, to see what we are made of, if we will keep faith in him. That would not be a God of universal love and compassion, but a cruel monster. What I do try to believe, however, is that whatever happens to us - whether it is good, bad or just ordinary - God is always there, present, wanting to draw us into the circle of his love, just as he must surely be present now, in this crisis, inviting us to trust in him - and in our hearts we probably know that there is no other way, no other rock on which we can build our faith.

After convincing Thomas by asking him to see and touch Jesus says, 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.' We cannot see, we cannot touch the risen Lord, but we can believe that he is risen, that he lives and that through him we too can live, emerge from our isolation and know the peace and joy that only God can give. On Divine Mercy Sunday, and always, with Sr. Faustina we can say

JESUS, I TRUST IN YOU - JEZU UFAM TOBIE

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin (robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk)