

The unifying theme running through all three of today's Scripture readings is faith. The most obvious example of that is the gospel with its account of Thomas and his doubts.

The initial appearance of the risen Jesus described in that account took place on Easter Sunday evening, the second one, a week later. The only appearance that the Gospel of John mentions prior to these is the one to Mary Magdalen at the tomb on Easter Sunday morning. Thomas has heard of Mary's experience and now hears about a similar experience of the disciples, an experience that he himself has not shared. His refusal to believe is at least in part a refusal to believe in what they are saying. When Thomas does encounter the risen Jesus, his doubts vanish. In calling him "My Lord and my God," Thomas goes beyond anyone else in the Gospels in expressing faith in the divinity of Jesus.

Christian faith is a great deal more than just a general feeling or vague sense that the world and human life have meaning. It is faith in God, faith in the God who has revealed something of himself in the story of Israel and above all in the life and destiny of Jesus. As Christian faith, it focuses in a special way on the person of Jesus and on what God has done for us through him.

When the apostle Paul speaks of faith, he emphasizes the saving power of the death and resurrection of Jesus, while John puts a greater emphasis on his person. For John, Jesus is above all the Word or Son of God in human form.

The most encouraging part of today's gospel for us is the final remark of Jesus, "Blessed are those who have not seen but who believe."

To believe is simultaneously something that we do and that God does in us. "No one comes to me," that is, no one believes in me, Jesus once said, unless he or she is drawn by the Father. Paul, for his part, was convinced that "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit."

Even though we cannot give ourselves faith, we can and must foster and nourish the faith that we have received. Obvious ways to do so are prayer and participating in the liturgy of the church, especially the Mass. Every bit as important, however, is whether and to what degree we put what we believe into practice in our everyday life.

Today's reading from the first letter of John declares that, "everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God." It goes on to say that the authenticity of our faith is revealed in the way we treat one another. For John faith and love are inseparable. Faith in Jesus inspires us to imitate him and to do

what he calls us to do. What that is, is largely summed up in the single word love. At the Last Supper Jesus said to the disciples, "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you." He then adds, "By this will everyone know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another."

Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles evokes what was probably a short-lived moment in the history of the early Church in Jerusalem. "The whole group of those who believed," it says, "were of one heart and soul and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." As a result, it adds, "there was not a needy person among them."

Christian faith is never a matter of the isolated individual. Think for a moment of our experience here at Sunday Mass. We come together to pray and to worship. In receiving communion, we are drawn into a closer relationship with Jesus and, by that very fact, with one another. The Eucharist is meant to build up the body of Christ, which is the church.

The practice of people putting their possessions in common, as described in today's reading from Acts, was a major inspiration in the development over the centuries of various forms of Christian community life.

The conditions that made it possible for people to embrace such an ideal at that time are no longer those in which the vast majority of us live. If we cannot imitate what those early Christians did, we can at least be inspired by the spirit of detachment, generosity, and love that give their life together its distinctive quality.

Our second reading affirms that, “what is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.” The phrase “the world” here does not refer to God’s good creation but to the destructive and hurtful things that humans have introduced into it. It refers, for example, to all that threatens to undermine our faith and hope, to weaken our capacity for generosity and goodness, to turn us in on ourselves and our own needs and concerns and to lead us to disregard those of others.

Faith conquers the world to the extent that it effects the way we live, the values we embrace, our manner of engaging with the world and with one another. Such faith roots us in the infinite mystery of the God who has been revealed in Jesus as a God of love. It gives us a place to stand, a source of peace and courage.