

Prayer: Lord God, our creator, redeemer and sustainer, through your Holy Spirit you summon us to live out the ongoing message of the resurrection and the new life that is ours in Christ. May my words as both spoken and heard convey this truth with integrity and love. Amen.

Early last week, in the Sydney Morning Herald, Ross Gittins, the Economics Editor, wrote an opinion piece he entitled "Greed is the Market's forgotten vice". He began with the words "Where do Easter and business intersect?" and added "Well, what about greed?"

He quoted an Anglican theologian from Melbourne, Brian Rosner, who wrote a book "Beyond Greed" in which he stated that greed has been glamorised by the market economy and is a forgotten sin. Rosner defined greed as wanting more money and possessions and refusing to share. It is the opposite of contentment! That's an interesting observation – many people would say that the accumulation of wealth and material possessions somehow reinforces their security and safeguards their future, and that this then evokes a feeling of contentment! Rosner disputes that. He writes that those who choose such a lifestyle are rarely satisfied. They may feel very much in control, but in reality many fear failure, and insecure in their relationships and lack a sense of genuine fulfilment in life.

Last Sunday and again today we are confronted with the stirring message of Easter. In this, the life and teaching of Jesus, which was seemingly disposed of for good, is dramatically vindicated. For 3 years Jesus had taught that the Kingdom of God was near. In his ministry he revealed the Kingdom through some amazing signs of God's grace and love. At the same time he exposed the instinctive human desire to put one's self-interest at the centre of everything. Along the way he gained popularity as a prophet and teacher whose gifts appeared to give people what they wanted. But in time it became clear that his mission was counter cultural. The mood changed – and in the end vested interests conspired to dispose of him. Meanwhile his disciples, despite being called and prepared to continue his mission, just didn't seem to get it. They couldn't really grasp the concept of life in the Kingdom, shaped by grace, and when the end came, they lost hope and huddled together in despair.

Quite understandably, their default position kicked in. Now, they had to make the best of things – to keep clear of trouble, stay out of sight, and when ready and able, go back to the old life and the culture that embraced it.

When word of Jesus' resurrection spread, the disciples were slow to respond. It was only when Jesus appeared to his disciples in person, mysteriously passing through a closed door, offering a word of peace, and then revealing his hands and side, that they rejoiced. In John's account we find Jesus repeating his word of peace and then sending the disciples on

the mission he himself inaugurated. Then we are told that he breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit".

It is interesting to note that John, writing many years after Luke, compresses the events of Easter and Pentecost into one.

In the closed room, the disciples were in no doubt that the Jesus they knew in person was now before them as the resurrected Christ. And this amazing experience restored for them the truth of life in the Kingdom of God which would from now on reshape their own lives and witness. Before the crucifixion, they had glimpses of the Kingdom of God, now, following the resurrection, it was revealed as an eternal reality.

But Thomas was not there. And on being told by the others that they had seen the Lord, he was sceptical. He demanded proof. All quite understandable of course and after all this was the initial response of the others! Interestingly, when Thomas was among the disciples when Jesus again entered their room, there is no record that he actually placed his hand in Jesus' wounds, though invited to do so! [However, note that painting by Carvaggio, "The Incredulity of Thomas", where Thomas looks intently at Jesus' wounds, and thrusts his finger into Jesus' side. Jesus doesn't look accusingly, but rather appears to guide the hand – offering himself as physical proof!]

When Thomas is confronted by the risen Lord, and is greeted by the forgiveness and grace embodied in the words "Peace be with you", he instantly believes and makes the great confession of John's Gospel "My Lord and my God". Thomas is aware that he is not only in the presence of Jesus, but of God, and his declaration shows that he is a new person!

Early in his masterful novel, *Les Miserables*, Victor Hugo describes the fall, indeed the total moral disintegration, of Jean Valjean, a common labourer who is sentenced to five years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving family. The ravages of his time in prison, which stretched for 5 to 19 years, have, in Hugo's words, withered his soul.

On release, Valjean's descent continues, for no one will give him work or shelter or even sell him food because of his criminal record. Hopeless and exhausted, he stumbles into the house of an old bishop, who greets him courteously and treats him as an honoured guest.

Valjean is confused by his host's generosity and can't accept this affirmation so he steals some silver plates from the Bishop's cupboard and flees into the night. The next day the police arrive at the bishop's house with the captured criminal and the silver. Valjean is naturally dejected and readies himself for his inevitable return to prison.

Confronted by the man who returned his generosity with treachery, the bishop astonishes both the thief and the police with the words "I am glad to see you, but I gave you the candlesticks, too, which are silver like the rest and would bring 200 francs. Why didn't you take them along with the cutlery?"

Hugo narrates that on hearing the bishop's astounding words, "Jean Valjean opened his eyes and looked at the bishop with an expression no human tongue could describe."

Forced to release their captive at the bishop's insistence, the police depart and the bishop hands Valjean the candlesticks, holding him just a moment longer before sending him on his way with this blessing: "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil but good. It is your soul that I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and give it to God."

In the very next scene, Hugo describes Valjean's lengthy and pathetic weeping as he realises the depths to which he has sunk, and begins to comprehend the whole new world of forgiveness and grace into which he has been ushered. In that moment Jean Valjean dies..and is reborn, and much of the rest of the novel us the story of the new reality which Valjean both lives and gives as a result of his encounter with transforming grace.

Such mercy always has the power to transform, but it does not replace the reality of this world. In his encounter with grace, Jean Valjean, as with Thomas, is confronted by a totally new experience of life altogether. It is life in the Kingdom of God. But it is also life set in the context of the world. Valjean still in the oppressive and chaotic Paris environment, facing persecution and death. Thomas remains in Palestine, facing the same opposition which led to the death of his Lord. And so it for us too as we live our own often confusing and always ambiguous worlds.

But there is something new, something different. For what both Thomas and Valjean discovered is also our own discovery – that our life is not an escape from this world, not a shift away from reality, but rather a conviction that God's grace, God's kingdom, has already intruded into and is transforming the kingdom of this world, so that nothing, not even life and death, will ever be the same again.

Do we really believe all this? Or is it just the stuff of Biblical narrative or an imaginative historical novel?

Well, what about this for a contemporary snapshot of redeeming grace in action?

Last year, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio of Argentina was elevated to the Papacy. His election caught some by surprise – a South American at the Vatican? In the year his Papacy, Pope Francis has been saying and doing some unusual things. He has embraced simplicity in a way that is radically different from the life style of his predecessors. He has rejected palace life for an apartment; he prefers to use public transport or friend's used car, and he offers sermons which invariably have a pastoral theme.

In his first mass as Pope he urged the Catholic Church to preach Jesus Christ in everything it does or risk becoming just another charity. "We can walk all we want, we can build many things, but if we don't proclaim Jesus Christ, something is wrong". More recently he said that the Catholic Church must shake off an obsession with teachings on abortion,

contraception and homosexuality and become more merciful or risk the collapse of its entire moral edifice like a house of cards”.

Just words?

Last September 35 year old shop worker Anna Romero was on holiday when her mobile phone went off. She saw it was from the Rome area but didn't recognize the number but she answered anyway. "Hello Anna" said the voice "this is Pope Francis". This was no joke. A month previously she had written to the Pope out of despair. Not knowing the right address she sent it to the "Holy Father Pope Francis, Vatican City, and Rome – just like a message in a bottle! The man she had been seeing, and had recently got pregnant with, had turned out to be married. She wanted to have the child but the father was pressuring her to have an abortion.

She was full of questions. Would the church baptise the child? After all, she was a divorcee and assumed that the church would frown on her. The Pope phoned to tell her that he was sure they could find a priest to baptise her child, 'but if not" the pope added 'you know there is always me”.

Sounds as though the new Pope is practising what he preaches! Isn't this simple anecdote a beautiful demonstration of the response of mercy from someone who is prepared to do what it takes to place mercy at the heart of his practice of the faith? He knows in his heart what living by faith in the risen Christ is all about and is prepare to take risks to witness to the new reality inaugurated in Christ's life, death and resurrection!

It wasn't just Anna Romero who was blessed, but in his own gift of mercy so too, I am sure, was Pope Francis.

Easter means that we are forever transformed people. Easter isn't just a day, it's every day. Easter isn't just a celebration, it's a way of life.

Easter is knowing that because we have been joined by baptism to the risen one, Jesus the Christ, we participate in his new reality and are indeed new creatures. Therefore it is we, and not the oppressive realities of this life, who are, as Paul writes, in everything "more than conquerors through the One who loved us”.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And nothing will be the same again. So, thanks be to God, to whom be ascribed all praise and majesty power and dominion for ever and ever, Amen.