

27 April

The time of the resurrection was a time of great faith in the early Church. Today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles demonstrates this great sense of unity and purpose, driven by the power and grace of Easter faith. The early disciples gathered regularly for prayer, for the breaking of the bread; they lived together and shared everything; they cared for the poor and needy and because of their fidelity and love, the Lord added to their community as new members came forward to be baptised. They made a deep impression on those around them because the wider community was moved by their sense of faith.

We have another story of faith in today's Gospel, a passage we know so well. While all the disciples rejoice at seeing the risen Lord, Thomas is the one who has doubt and refuses to believe. So Jesus calls him to faith. Thomas was reluctant to accept the testimony of the other disciples. Their word wasn't enough for him. Thomas needed to see and touch and so Jesus invites him, 'Place your hand into my side. Look, feel, touch. Doubt no longer but believe'. And so from doubt, Thomas is moved to faith.

This Easter season is a time of great joy, a celebration of the great gift of faith each of us has received in baptism. Today in Rome, there will be a particular celebration of faith that is a source of great joy for all the Church. Pope Francis will celebrate the joint canonisation of two great popes of the twentieth century; Pope John XXIII who called the Second Vatican Council and Pope John Paul II who was the world's most travelled missionary pope. Each of these men lived out in their own particular way the call of faith that came to them in Baptism. Each of them wanted to share the joy of the Gospel not just with Catholics but to spread the grace and joy of faith with all men and women of the world.

Much of my history research has been on the life of Pope John XXIII, the 'good' pope who warmed the hearts of many and whose style of leadership in the 1960s, just like Pope Francis was infectious and caught the attention of many. On three occasions, I have been to the birthplace of Pope John XXIII in the tiny village of Sotto Il Monte in northern Italy, part of the beautiful province of Bergamo. When he became pope in October 1958, Angelo Roncalli took the name 'John', a name which had

not been taken by a pope for centuries. The reason? He stated that it was his father's name and the name of the humble parish of his baptism. I have celebrated Mass in the church where Angelo Roncalli was baptised. I stood before that tiny baptismal font and was deeply moved that a great man, a fine Christian, a dedicated and holy priest, a good pope was called by God from the waters of that font. On the day of his election as pope, he remembered the day of his baptism, he remembered the gift of faith that the Risen Lord had poured out into his heart and the grace of this sacrament accompanied him all the days of his life.

It is a great honour to become the pope; it is an extraordinary privilege to be recognised as a saint by the Catholic Church. But these two great men first received the greatest and highest calling in life in the waters of baptism, their first vocation, their call to discipleship, witness, prayer and service. The Church gives us the life of these saints as examples to follow. The Church gives us this Easter season to continually deepen our understanding of what happens to us in Baptism, of what it means to live our baptismal commitment, of struggling like Thomas and moving from doubt to faith. We are an Easter people filled with the peace of the risen Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. As we gather in celebration, we praise the God who calls us out of darkness and into his own wonderful light.