

Reflective Worship

7th November 2021

Peace

[Scene setting – John’s account of what happened on the evening on the first Easter Day]

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

John 20:19-23

I’m sure we’re all familiar with John’s account of the encounter between the disciples of Jesus (minus Thomas on this occasion) and the risen Jesus. Given that we were thinking about the Holy Spirit this morning, and focussing on Peace this evening, it seems a pretty appropriate one to reflect on today.

John gives us the bare bones of the story – there’s lots that’s left to our imaginations, not least the emotions of the disciples

Despair?

Fear - certainly

Confusion – it’s hard to imagine otherwise

And then when Jesus appears

Incomprehension?

Terror?

And then unimaginable joy.

No wonder his first words to them are “Peace be with you.”

And then he shows them his hands and side and says “Peace be with you” again. And if the first time he’s speaking to their emotions, this time he is speaking to their spirits. By showing them his hands and side he is reminding them of what he has done – that through his death and resurrection he has restored their relationship with the Father; that they are truly ‘at peace’ with God.

Thirty years later, St Paul will write to the Roman Christians, “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.”¹

¹ Romans 5:1-2

Jesus' death and resurrection have made it possible for us to know God's peace. Real peace. Not just an absence of conflict, but complete restoration. All is set right. Nothing can keep us from the love of God in Christ Jesus². (Although Paul had to write three more chapters of his letter before he got to that bit!)

And at this point in my sermon planning I thought – fine. That's more or less what I want to say. When we truly know God's peace it's a bit like a small child snuggling down into their parent's arms at the end of a long day, and feeling the warmth and safety and security of their love. That's as good a picture of God's "shalom" as I can think of.

I even had an idea of what we would do for a response. We'd listen to the beautifully haunting Taize chant which we listened to earlier in the service

My peace I leave you
My peace I give you
Trouble not your hearts
My peace I leave you
My peace I give you
Be not afraid

So off I went to YouTube to find the chant. But when I began to play the video it was preceded by an advert. For an aid agency. With footage of a tiny 2 year old girl crying desperately from hunger. She was little more than skin and bones, lying weakly on the bed. Close to death. The doctor tending her said that she was basically healthy – just so malnourished that she couldn't fight off the chest infection she had acquired.

I thought about my own 2 year old granddaughter – bouncing around. Laughing, learning, enjoying life. I thought of the millions of other malnourished children across the globe – in Ethiopia, Yemen, South Sudan, and countless other places.

And I thought – how, as Christians, can we dare to speak about the peace of God, when such injustices, such atrocities are all around us. When there is such a lack of peace in the world.

Is it all some sort of sick joke?

Well no – after the first wave of emotion had passed, I realised that wasn't the case.

But it was a wake up call.

For yes, we have peace with God. But the primary purpose of that is not just to give us a nice warm fuzzy feeling

In the story we just heard, Jesus breathes on the disciples, fills them with the breath of God, the Holy Spirit, and gives them work to do. Work of forgiveness and healing, and what is often called "saving".

² Romans 8:35-39

Yes, we have peace with God. Jesus has saved us *from* our pasts, from everything that holds us in thrall, from everything that spoils our relationship with God

But he has also saved us *for* – saved us to be part of the great task of establishing outposts of God’s kingdom in this world

“Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”

God’s kingdom – where we see God’s values of love, mercy, justice and peace being lived out.

“Peace is not the absence of tension, but the presence of justice,” as Martin Luther King famously said.

There can be no true peace without justice. No shalom.

Without being underpinned by justice, what we call ‘peace’ is little more than a sticking plaster over a deep and festering wound. It might look like it on the surface, but in truth it is little more than appeasement, or ignoring the rights of a part of society in the name of unity, or any of the many other ways in which outright conflict is contained – but it is not true peace.

True peace is painful and difficult. It involves dealing with the roots of the problem. It invariably requires acknowledging and seeking forgiveness for the pain of other, forgiveness, and a shared determination to build a better way of doing things. It needs huge courage; and takes time. It requires the will to make it succeed, support whilst it is happening, and active engagement from all involved – from those at the highest levels of leadership right through to individuals. Maybe we might look to post-apartheid South Africa or to Rwanda following the genocide to see what this might look like in practice.

And yet, even rebuilding a country after unbelievable pain seems easier than addressing some of the other great global injustices – wealth distribution and climate change to name but two.

And it’s tempting to feel that there’s nothing we can do in the face of such apparently insurmountable problems. But, you know, I’m not sure that is true.

Let’s think back to the reading. Jesus commissioned his disciples to go out and make a difference. And to do that through the power of the Holy Spirit, and *in his name*. Which means, to act on his behalf. In his place. We are God’s eyes and ears. His hands and feet. His influence, and his wallet. When we do these things, we have the power of God behind us. And the power of God can do the most remarkable things.

Raising Jesus from the dead, to name just one.
So yes we can

We can – pray

We can – make a financial donation

We can – change our lifestyle to consume less and protect the environment

And we can do other things to.

Over the past couple of weeks two things said by politicians have really stood out for me
One was a comment made by a local political leader in response to a question about climate change – words along the lines of

“I don’t think that will become party policy because there are no votes in it”

And words from a national leader at COP26

“What can everybody do? Make life really uncomfortable for any government and any leader that’s made an agreement and is not doing enough.

“At times, that will be my government, and rightly so. We have all got to be pushed much harder, much faster. This summit should not feel comfortable for anybody in a position of leadership and responsibility... because nobody, yet, is doing enough, and that’s the reality.”

We can – make our local and national leaders aware that these things really do matter to people. That there are votes in it.

Remember a few weeks ago, the Government saying that “they were surprised at the response to the first lockdown, because they thought that people would not tolerate being told to stay at home.”

We need to make sure they are keep in touch with what we really think – not what they think we think.

Remember earlier this week, the Government making a U-turn on their policy in relation to standards in public life, in response to public opinion.

So can I suggest that one of the ways we can be God’s voices for peace is to make our voices heard by those who hold or aspire to leadership. To write to our MPs and local political leaders, may be even to attend public meetings – to put ourselves there to be seen and heard. It doesn’t need to be long and complex. To be honest, I suspect that lots of one line letters simply stating the writer’s position on a given topic will probably hold more sway than one heavily researched and expertly argued one.

And yes, we *will* get letters back saying how wonderful their party already is, and we just need to accept that as part of the process – what really matters is that our voices will have been heard. And our potential votes will have been counted.

“Peace be with you,” said the risen Jesus to the fearful disciples. “as the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

May we hear Jesus call to play our part in bringing peace and justice to our troubled world, and may we know the presence of his Spirit as we do so.