

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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PEACE BE WITH YOU

3rd April 2016

John 20:19-23

Acts 5:27-32

The accounts of the resurrection in the Gospels are all a bit different, which I think indicates the confusion that there was in those days for the disciples, which remained in their later recollections of the events – “Did he appear to Peter first? No, wasn't it to Mary – oh yes. And then there was that time he came to Cleopas on the road, when was that – don't you remember, that was just before he came to us all in the upper room.” But that Jesus came to his disciples on the evening of Easter Sunday in the upper room seems to be fairly sure. He came and he offered them peace.

One of the things which we crave most, which we pray for most, which we know that we and the world need most is peace. Peace: absence of war, freedom to be, lack of worry, quietness of heart, hope for a future. The word means so much. And we need it. Peace is what we are offered by the risen Jesus: peace, which comes with his presence and his forgiveness.

When Jesus came and stood among his disciples his words were “Peace be with you.” He came and stood beside them even though they had locked themselves in and were afraid to go out. He came and offered them peace.

Jesus himself knew what it was to be afraid of what John calls “the Jews”, meaning the Jewish leaders. He had been afraid in the garden of Gethsemane. He had asked God to hide him, to take his coming suffering at the hands of these people away from him. But in the end he had been strengthened enough to say “Not my will but yours be done,” and to go through with the suffering which was meted out to him. He had been enabled to conquer his fear.

Sometimes people who have done that, who have conquered fear, who have done what they were afraid to do, have little sympathy for others who are afraid in similar situations. And the disciples were in a similar situation. They were known to have been Jesus' followers. They felt themselves to be marked men. And they had seen Jesus face the fear they now knew, but they could not do what he had done.

Jesus could have come to his disciples and when he found them hiding he could have been cross with them: “What are you doing here? Why are you not out telling about me?” He could have been disappointed: “Have you learned nothing from being with me? Could you not go and spread the good news?” He could have been bluffly encouraging “Go on, get out there, be men!” Probably the disciples expected these reactions, if they expected anything at all. Probably part of what they were feeling, part of what was keeping them hidden from the world was a crushing and debilitating sense of guilt.

Fear usually brings guilt with it. We don't like being afraid, we don't like what seems like weakness in our characters, and so we also feel guilty. And the combination of fear and guilt can paralyse us and prevent us ever doing anything at all. I expect that was the disciples' situation. There they were in that upper room, hidden, locked in, probably trying to keep quiet. And they did not know how long they would stay there, but they did not know how they would ever dare come out, or how they would know if it was ever safe to do so. They had no plan. They could envisage no future.

There are people who live like that, sadly. People who are afraid within their domestic situation; people who are afraid to leave a job which they hate and which drains their joy of life from them; people who are so tied to the past that they cannot move forward in life.

And then there are those who live with real, external fears. There are the situations which many Christians find themselves in, when they do not know at what point they may be picked on, targeted, selected for death because of their faith. Last Sunday, Easter Day, over seventy Pakistanis were killed in a park in Lahore, most of whom were Christians out celebrating after their Easter worship. Every act like that, which kills almost at random, is designed not only to kill but to paralyse the wider community. Now Christians in Lahore are afraid for their lives, not only from terrorists, but also lest they be blamed by their neighbours for bringing death into the town, because of their faith.

One of the difficulties which our friend Sarah Pickworth faces in seeking to minister in the name of Christ in Afghanistan is that if Afghans are seen to be with her, as a Westerner and as a Christian, then she has put them in danger. The fear with which they live is designed to paralyse, to stop life. People have to live so quietly, so circumspectly, that very often they might as well be like those frightened disciples, hiding in a locked room.

And Jesus came to his frightened, guilty disciples, who could not face what he had faced, who had deserted him in his hour of trial, who had slept while he was in agony, who had denied him; and he said "Peace be with you." No one knows the human heart as Jesus does. No one knows the human heart as God does. No one knows your heart and mine.

Jesus gave them his peace. He did not give them blame or encouragement or directions, but he gave them his peace, which means his forgiveness and acceptance and understanding and love. He showed them his hands and side, so that they knew it really was him, so that they could have one particular fear laid to rest – the fear that they were dreaming or hallucinating, or that they saw a ghost. He showed them his hands and side to let them know that despite all he had suffered, or because of it; despite their failures during his time of trial, he still loved them, still trusted them, still accepted them. And then he told them what they were to do. They were to be sent as the Father had sent him. And what did that mean? It wasn't that they were to go out and proclaim the good news of his resurrection – not yet. It wasn't that they were to lead a rebellion against the powers that be – some of them might still have been expecting that. It was that they were to forgive. The Father sent Jesus to forgive the world and the individuals in the world.

We saw him forgive when he hung on the cross. He knew that they didn't realise the enormity of what they had done in crucifying the Son of God. He knew that they didn't realise the enormity of making an example out of an innocent man. And he knew that

these were not reasons to excuse them, but that it was in his power to forgive them, and to ask God to forgive them as well. Now, having forgiven those who actively put him on the cross, with his peace he is forgiving those who had failed him when that happened. And he is giving them the task of forgiving people as well.

They would have to forgive each other, first of all. Soon Thomas would come and be his usual practical, disbelieving self. And they would have to forgive him. They knew that each of them had let Jesus down, and had let each other down, let down the fellowship of the disciples, if you like, during the events of Thursday and Friday. Peter had disowned him, but all of them had deserted and fled. Some of them had crept back to watch at the foot of the cross, but none of them had anything to be proud of. And they needed to forgive each other to heal their group again.

If they forgave each other, they would also have to learn to forgive those of whom they were so afraid. To forgive someone is to take away the power of fear. There is a Christian Palestinian farmer named Daoud Nasser, living near Bethlehem on land his family has owned for a hundred years – this year – who regularly faces attempts, through legal forces and through intimidation and acts of invasive vandalism, to leave his family land and let the Israeli authorities take it over. His farmland is entered by way of his motto, as on a stone he has written in four languages “We refuse to be enemies.” He and his family are treated as enemies by those who would like to evict them from their land, but although they determinedly hang on to their land, they refuse to act like enemies. When their trees are uprooted, they wait then re-plant. When their home was destroyed they decided to live in caves, as their ancestors had done. And they use their farm as an international centre for peace and reconciliation. “We refuse to be enemies” is a profound statement of forgiveness.

The disciples would have a lot to forgive and they had a lot to be forgiven them. And yet, not so many months later, we find them, as we read in Acts, disobeying the orders of the authorities and proclaiming the resurrection. They had learned their lesson well. The effect of having Jesus’ peace given to them had, not all at once, but over a short time, given them the confidence to speak of him, to be brave as he was, to even defy those who saw them as enemies, enemies of the state and the fragile balance of power within it. And when they explain themselves to the authorities they say that Jesus came to give to people repentance and forgiveness of sins. Repentance means a turning around, a choosing of a new path – in this case one which is illumined by the forgiveness of sins.

If there is one thing which we all need, it is peace. The world needs it and each person in the world needs it. Peace is what the risen Christ offers us. He will never force it on us – you cannot force peace, because force is an act of violence – but he offers it to all, however they have done wrong. His peace is his forgiveness, his acceptance, his new start, his love. And he calls us also to be that kind of peace makers, forgiving within the church community, within our families, and in the wider world.

Forgiveness is not easy to accept and is not easy to give. It is more than a word, but it begins with a word. It begins with saying – even if only to yourself “I forgive you, I forgive you, I forgive you.” As we learn to say that, even in our hearts, to others, so we will learn to accept it, from God and from others and yes, even from ourselves. And the peace of Christ will be known in us, around us and wherever his forgiveness leads us. Amen.