

Easter 2: 19th April 2020

John 20:19-31 'Fear, Forgiveness and Peace'

Contemplatio: Michael Wood (Rev'd)

Last week, on Easter Day, we hear a resurrection account from Matthew's gospel. Today we hear an account from John's gospel. John's gospel was the last to be written – towards the end of the first century and it has a very deeply developed theological proclamation of who Jesus is. A technical way of saying this is that John's gospel has a well developed *Christology*.

For example, Matthew's gospel begins with a *human genealogy* of Jesus going back to Abraham. But John begins the story of Jesus at a *cosmic level*. As we hear every year on Christmas Eve, John's gospel begins with the words, '*In the origin was the logos [that is, the Christ], and the logos was present with GOD, and the logos was god*'. (John 1:1). And here, at Easter, we hear the end of John's gospel with a rounding out of this same idea, which Thomas's great confession where Thomas says, 'My LORD, and my GOD' (John 20:28). And herein lies the scandal of Christianity – that GOD – the originator of all things – the creator of the universe is a wounded one – carrying the marks of crucifixion.

So that was just a word about the big picture. Today I just want to make three observations about this resurrection story – three things that stand out for me. And I've called these 'Fear, Forgiveness and Peace'.

First of all – **Fear**.

*'When, therefore, it was early evening of that first day of the Sabbath-week, and where the disciples were **the doors had been sealed** for fear of the Judeans, Jesus came and stood in their midst and says to them, 'Peace to you'.*

The first really important thing to remind ourselves of here is that when this gospel refers to the 'Jews', as it often does, it reflects a particular historical setting at the end of the first century when John's gospel was written. We must never forget that Jesus was a Jew, embraced and wrestled with the Torah, preached in synagogues and visited the temple. Some of Jesus' Jewish followers who formed the earliest communities were not initially called Christians. They were simply Messianic Jews and they continued to meet in Synagogues and proclaim that they had, in fact, met the Messiah. This naturally gave rise to a lot of debate and controversy, so much so, that by the end of the first century, a number of synagogues were starting to ask these followers of Jesus, these Messianic Jews, to leave. And so there is this very real tension lying behind the gospel of Matthew and we must never allow that particular set of historic circumstances to be read as Jesus someone seeing Jews as his enemies – which would have been completely unthinkable. In light of all the anti

Semitism of history which has justified itself specifically on these passages, we have to constantly resist such a reading of John's gospel.

So coming back to the events immediately after Jesus death, read through the lens of John, we find that there early followers of Jesus were, quite naturally very scared...and they were scared not only that the Romans were coming after them next but also of certain temple leaders who, as we've just said, rather unfortunately lumps under the generic heading of "Judeans/Jews".

Most translations talk about the doors being locked, but I like David Bentley Hart's translation which has that the doors were *sealed*. Think of a hospital or lab with hermetically sealed doors – closed off from the world....keeping the world out....keeping virus's in and other people out, driven by the fear of death.

And yet these *sealed* doors are no obstacle to the raised Christ. So immediately we know that the resurrected body of Christ is not a resuscitated corpse, because resuscitated corpses do not walk through walls. And this resurrected Christ stood in their midst and says, '*Peace to you*'.

What kind of peace is this? Back in the 14th Chapter of John's gospel, in a passage where Jesus predicts his death, he says, '*These things I have spoken to you while remaining with you; but the Advocate, the SPIRIT, the Holy One, which the Father will send in my name, he will teach you everything, and will remind you of everything I have told you. Peace I leave you, my peace I give to you; I give to you NOT as the cosmos gives. Do not let your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid*'.

What the story is saying here is that this peace that Jesus gives is a different kind of peace to what we currently think of. It's not a better psychological adjustment that we can achieve through a therapeutic intervention. Neither it is the kind of peace which brought by the defeat of one's enemies – it's not a Pax Romana, the 'peace of Rome' which is bought at the end of a sword.

This peace of Christ – the pax Christi – is a gift which is given at the deepest levels of our being – it breaks through to us as grace. It comes into the hermeneutically sealed nooks and crannies of our hearts. This is partly why we meditate using the simplicity of the prayer word – it is a recognition that the peace of Christ dwells in our hearts, and that we are simply being asked to recognise that – to trust it. And that's what saying the prayer word is – it is an act of simple trust at deeper and deeper levels.

The second and third things I want to draw attention to are **forgiveness** and **peace**

These are closely related to the first point about fear. We so often live in fear of what other people think of us, or might do to us. This fear is what has driven the disciples into their sealed room. They have utterly failed their teacher and friend. All that teaching and formation appears to have gone down the drain. When things have got tough – they have gone into hiding. And in hiding they are not much use to anyone. They must have shame,

along with their fear. Perhaps they also felt angry and vengeful towards the Romans and the Judean authorities. Perhaps in their imaginations they entertained fantasies of revenge. We can't know for sure.

But what we can know is that the peace that Jesus brings is completely linked to forgiveness. In the forgiveness which Jesus proclaims, he releases the disciple from their shame and guilt, and anger and fear and he commissions them, to announce forgiveness to others. And they don't have to do this by their own effort. They will only be able to do this because of the Holy Spirit who Jesus breathes on them. The Holy Spirit in Christian understanding is nothing less than the power of forgiveness....a forgiveness which brings peace. There is nothing more powerful that we can do for another person than to communicate to another person that we love them unconditionally – that we are not withholding forgiveness from them – that we are not holding something OVER them.

And because this Spirit of forgiveness is not only offered to our friends, but also to our enemies, this is a different kind of peace than the world gives. We cannot hold a spirit of vengeance against anyone because God does not hold anything against us.

This is the primary mission of the church and it is our mission as followers of Jesus. If we are not being people who offer forgiveness and deep peace to the world, then we have nothing to offer. Forgiveness is the foundation of peace. Peace and forgiveness come from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is breathed on us by Jesus. The Holy Spirit testifies to Jesus as the one who redeems, that is, forgives and reconciles the world. This peace comes to us as a gift, as grace, at the deepest level of our hearts. It penetrates sealed rooms.

This is why we are called to prayer, so that God's forgiveness and peace become an experienced reality for us, and not just a nice idea.

....Taize Chant: Nada te turbe – Nothing can trouble.