
Peace be with you

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 7 April 2024

Acts 4:32-35 • 1 John 1:1-2:2 • John 20:19-31



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

In the days and maybe weeks following the Resurrection, Jesus appears to his disciples several times. We talked last week about the initial appearance (as St John tells it) to Mary Magdalene, outside the tomb, when she fails to recognise him until he speaks her name. This week we hear about an appearance to a group of disciples who were hiding inside a room for fear of the authorities. We can't really blame the disciples for being afraid! Their beloved leader and rabbi has just been executed. They don't know if maybe the Roman centurions will be sent to round up all his disciples as well. In addition, John tells us about that famous disciple, Thomas, known as "Doubting Thomas", because he would not believe in Jesus' resurrection until he could see the proof for himself.

But today let's look at the first part of the Gospel reading, when Jesus appears in the room with the disciples, apparently through the locked door, and tells them, and gives them, some very important things.

What does Jesus say first to those in the room? "Peace be with you." It seems like a common, casual greeting. It was the usual thing that Jews said to each other. "Peace be with you," or "God's peace be with you," calling for God's blessing on the other person. It was often said when entering someone's house. It was considered polite. But it is more than simply polite. For us as Christians, it is a sincere wish that those we greet may continue in the love of God, that God's Spirit may continue with them. When we share the peace in our worship services, this is what we are doing. We are wishing for each other that we may continue as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The wish is two-fold. We want God to bless our brothers and sisters; and we want our brothers and sisters to continue in faith. So it is a request of God, *and* of our fellow Christians. We pray that God will bless them, and we pray that they will continue to follow Christ. For after all, true peace comes only through faith in Christ. So when we "share the peace" each Sunday, it is an important part of our service. It reinforces our Communion as Christians. That's why you'll sometimes hear clergy say (and I've said it myself) that we should not use that time for catching up with each other. We can do that over a cuppa afterwards. We should concentrate on the serious — yet joyous — sharing of a prayer for peace.

Jesus once sent out the twelve disciples to preach everywhere that the Kingdom of heaven is near. He told them

When you go into a house, say, 'Peace be with you.' If the people in that house welcome you, let your greeting of peace remain; but if they do not welcome you, then take back your greeting. (Matthew 10:12-13)

Their greeting of peace could be accepted by the people in the house, just as we accept it from each other; or it could be rejected, in which case the disciples were to "take back" their greeting. It was not that the disciples wished harm on the people in the house; but the giving and receiving of the peace is a mark of fellowship. Those who failed to receive it were not those selected by God (at that particular time) to be part of the fellowship.

But *we* are part of God's fellowship. So think about this the next time we share the peace here. It isn't just something you say at that particular time in the service. It is a sincere prayer and blessing we wish on each other.

The other thing I wanted to say about this passage is that here, Jesus establishes the Church. That gathering in the room with the locked door was the first church service. For Jesus follows up his "Peace be with you" with "As the

Father sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). God’s church is to be a faithful gathering of disciples, whose mission is to go out into the world and spread the Gospel. God sent Jesus into the world; he completed his mission; now it’s our turn. And the linking of peace with sending is significant, for what is it that we have to offer those who have not yet known Jesus Christ? Yes — God’s peace, a peace which only comes through faith in God, and the acceptance of God’s love for us.

And what do we need in order to be faithful disciples and missionaries ourselves? The gift of the Spirit. In the very next breath — yes, breath — Jesus gives the the Spirit. He breathes it on them. Just as God breathed life into Adam, the first human, so Jesus, whom Paul calls the second Adam, breathes the Spirit into us. The disciples receive it first, and later, as we recall from the Acts of the Apostles, many more followers receive it.

So Jesus, through the giving of the peace, through the command that we continue his own mission of spreading the Gospel, and through the giving of the Spirit, establishes the church on earth. We are the heirs of those disciples from long ago. We are the ones to continue Jesus’ mission today.

And so my brothers and sisters, with our Lord Jesus Christ, with all the disciples of that long-ago time, and with all our fellow Christians down through the ages, let us say: Peace be with you! And also, Amen.