

John 20:19-end 19.4.20 Sermon at Home 4

What we know as the bible isn't just one book it is a whole library of books where the relationship of God with humanity and the whole world, and humanity's encounter with God is told in many different genres, but it largely unfolds through the experience of nations and individuals as they try, in their own ways, and with varying degrees of success to be God's people.

As a result of this something remarkable happens when we read the bible at different stages of our life – even the stories we thought we knew well become new and fresh as we discover the people within it, being normal people with emotions and feelings that traverse the centuries, were dealing with the same emotions and feelings - the same questions about how they fit into God's pattern, that we do today. That is why Sunday's Gospel reading exploded with relevance for us today as we battle Coronavirus, lockdown and its impact on us.

A couple of noun changes in the opening sentence and the relevance leaps out at us: **“When the household were together, with the doors locked for fear of the virus, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you!”**

If you here nothing else from today's sermon, hear that this verse can be true for you. The risen Christ still comes to his people, locked away in isolation through fear, and grants us his peace.

Two immediate questions need to be asked to help us recognise our place within this amazing narrative:

To whom was Jesus speaking? And what is this Peace that Jesus offered?

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The answer to the first question, is so obviously Jesus' disciples, that you may think me foolish for asking it. So let's turn the question round a bit and ask "Who did they think they were?"

What had they done after the last supper?— they had fallen asleep when Jesus needed them to pray with him and they had run away leaving Jesus all alone when he was captured, tortured and killed. At the cross they were exposed for their weakness and failure – like all of us they were a mixture of the people they wanted to be and the people they didn't want to be. In that locked room came a profound moment of healing when the risen Jesus offers peace to people whose failure to be the people they wanted to be was most raw. (Karl Jung said of the shadow part of our personality – that which we are often ashamed to face, and certainly not allow others to see – that it is 90% gold. By which he means that it is when we own that part of our real selves of which we are ashamed, that we become free to be the rich personality we are!)

Living in uncertain times where we have lost many of the certainties and rhythms that hold our lives together, many of us will find part of our shadow selves exposed. We will feel and behave in ways that we would rather not. (I wrote this the day after I had been really disappointed with myself - I had set myself various tasks for the day but somehow couldn't find the energy in me to begin them!) As our weaknesses become exposed this is not a time for wallowing in self-condemnation but rather to learn, as those disciples did, that Jesus has called us as complete people with our weaknesses as well as strengths. Some of our shadow side will be healed by coming into the light of his love and some will remain and we will become

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stronger as we learn to accept ourselves in the light of his acceptance of us.

My second question “What is this peace that Jesus offers?” has already been partly answered. Peace is a translation of the Hebrew word “Shalom!” which carries so much more richness than our English word peace. It carries with it this concept of wholeness - of finding ourselves loved and accepted as we are.

Whilst it can also embrace the sense of stillness that our word conveys— it also embraces the idea of activity for which we are designed. So with the Peace greeting was also a sending – a sending to be Jesus in the world. The current debate about mask wearing reminds us daily, in a negative way, of the power of our breath to pass on that which is inside us to others. Even if we are well, we are encouraged to assume that we carry the virus and remain socially distanced to avoid breathing Covid-19 on to others. When Jesus breathed on the disciples it wasn’t a virus he breathed on them – but the Holy Spirit – which was also his Spirit – filling them with the very nature of God so they could be sent out with a reverse infection – healing the virus of sin with the offer of forgiveness for everyone who will accept it. – sent out as the very representatives of Jesus – as his body changing the world in his name!

The disciples were overjoyed in the presence of Jesus – what had changed? Their circumstances were unchanged they were still in danger – but not only was Jesus with them briefly – he was living proof that he had conquered death itself – nothing could harm them that had not been dealt with by Jesus and in his love he promised to be with them always.

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Jesus sends them with the father's commission to him. No longer a locked in people, but a sent people.

Did you spot the irony in this – they were sent out – but they couldn't go! They had no idea when the Spirit would finally empower them and those 50 days to Pentecost must have dragged on and on feeling like a waste of time. But it wasn't a waste of time – God was preparing them to be a people of prayer, depending on him and his power.

Most of us are already feeling frustrated with not knowing how long the lockdown is going to go on – but it is not wasted time In God's eyes. – he is preparing us for a new normal, a new understanding of church, a new understanding of community and, for some, a new relationship with Jesus – that Thomas points us to.

No, I haven't forgotten about Thomas who was maybe doing his essential shop when Jesus turned up and he thought he had missed out. Poor Thomas, I think history has been so unfair on loyal Thomas, brave Thomas, inquisitive Thomas - for a moment he was caught off guard because he thought he had missed out – and has been falsely labelled Doubting Thomas ever since. But when he saw Jesus he became declaring Thomas: "My Lord, and my God!" The whole gospel summed up in 5 words! – Jesus - the son of God who came for the sins of the whole world – comes to us personally. Thomas may not have understood everything that had happened but he knew that the only way forward was to commit to following the God who had died for him with all his heart and with all his life.