

Our gospel narrative immediately follows on from Jesus's encounter with two of his followers on the road to Emmaus where he had been explaining all about the events of the past few days without them recognising him. That is, until he blessed and broke the bread at the supper table, when as Luke puts it "their eyes were opened" and Jesus simultaneously disappears.

Remember that same morning Mary Magdalene had discovered the empty tomb and had spoken to the risen Jesus, only the disciples hadn't believed her. Instead of rejoicing and rushing out to proclaim that Jesus was alive, they remained hidden in a locked room.

And now for the second time that day they were being told exactly the same thing....that Jesus was alive. What's more, whilst everyone is madly talking, Jesus from their midst calmly says, "Peace be with you".

And once again, their response is not one of joy and excitement. As Luke puts it: "they were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost".

To be fair to them, the one thing they knew for certain, namely that Roman soldiers never botched an execution. Their reputation for being utterly ruthless and efficient in the way they carried out death sentences was well founded. They would have made absolutely sure Jesus was dead.

And yet, Jesus is with the disciples. They can see him. They have heard him speak. But they don't recognise him.

It's almost as if they have forgotten all about Lazarus and the possibility that dead men can come back to life. The old adage that "the tomb was open, but their minds were closed" is spot on.

Despite hearing the two reports of Jesus being alive, they are rooted to the spot in fear. But what are they afraid of? Well, based on the other gospel texts they were probably worried that they were public enemy number one now that Jesus has been crucified and that the Jewish leaders would be hunting them down.

But could they have also been afraid of Jesus himself? If Jesus truly was alive, were they afraid of what he might think of their failure to stand by him? To have denied even knowing him? Remember, they had run out on Jesus at his arrest and in Peter's case subsequently even denied knowing him. Were they so filled with regret, shame or guilt that they feared deeply what Jesus's reaction might be?

I don't know the answer to that one. But what is certain is that Jesus's response to them says everything about him. He has compassion for them, not anger. He responds with kindness and gentleness, easing their fears and teasing out their scars of doubt by showing his own scars to them.

Jesus simply offers them the traditional greeting of the time, "Peace be with you" and we can only speculate how quickly they realised that Jesus was in fact, the source of the peace he spoke about.

Not immediately, I think because he continues to offer them proof that he wasn't just a vision or a ghost. He shows them his pierced hands and feet and invites them to touch him.

Then he asks for food and eats. He is showing them that his physical body has been restored just like Lazarus. But at the same time, so unlike Lazarus, because Jesus can appear and disappear apparently at will, even when the locked door is firmly shut to everyone else.

Jesus is not a dismembered spirit. He is physically real. “It is I” he says reassuringly, echoing his own words recorded in John’s gospel: “I am the resurrection and the life”.

The disciples are struggling to make sense out of the extraordinary. And they are not alone. Most bereaved families Revd Jon and I meet when planning the funeral of a loved one struggle too. Which is why we try to put hope at the heart of our funeral services.

We always try to quote Jesus’s famous words from John’s gospel: “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die”. The hope given by Jesus’s promise of eternal life to his disciples is the same hope and promise available to us 2000 years later.

Jesus then proceeds to explain, just as he had to the two on the road to Emmaus, everything that had been foretold about him in the Old Testament. The very same teaching that is vitally important for us today that “repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations”.

Turning away from sin and celebrating God’s forgiveness is an essential personal commitment in our Christian faith – after all that is at the very heart of the Lord’s prayer – but Jesus tells us it is much more than a personal commitment. It is to be a commitment for every nation on this earth.

And yet, the reality is that disputes both large and small have devastated the world throughout the past two thousand years. Today’s conflicts between Ukraine and Russia or Israel and Hamas are but two of many conflicts that are now part of our daily lives, whether we like it or not.

Each side continues with outright condemnation of the other in their respective conflicts. An imminent cessation of hostilities seems an impossibility. But then I’m reminded that the disciples also thought Jesus’s presence in that locked room was an impossibility.

Mine might be only one small voice but my prayer is for the seemingly impossible to happen once more so that repentance and forgiveness will somehow insert and impose itself into those warring situations.

After all, it is not that long ago that an end was brought to decades of bloody conflict in South Africa by what many saw as impossible, namely the extraordinary work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission led by Bishop Desmond Tutu.

Repentance and forgiveness were at the heart of that commission and as Archbishop Tutu said: “without forgiveness, there is no future”.

Shortly, we will have the opportunity to share Christ’s peace with each other but before then let’s sing and remind ourselves of his presence, glory and power.

**Terry Ward-Hall, 14 April 2024**

