

JOHN 20.19-23: PEACE BE WITH YOU!

[Chelmsford 3 May 2009]

It has been said: "*Keeping peace in the family requires patience, love, understanding, and at least two televisions*".

Televisions have their uses – but they also have their limits when it comes to peace. This morning I want us to focus on the peace that Jesus offers, and to do so through the prism of words that Jesus spoke to his disciples on the very first Easter Day.

Listen to John as he writes: "**It was late that Sunday evening and the disciples were gathered together behind locked doors, because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities. Then Jesus came and stood among them. 'Peace be with you', he said**" (20.19).

Jesus stepped into a room *filled with fear*. The Jews had already crucified their Master - would they, the disciples wondered, be next on the list?

Instead of being out and about enjoying the festivities of the season, here they were meeting "**behind locked doors**" - dreading the slightest sound - fearing some heavy-handed pounding on the door.

Into this tense atmosphere Jesus enters: "**Jesus came and stood among them**".

Goodness - can you imagine the scene? Hearts that were already beating fast, suddenly went like the clappers – they went into overdrive.

'Jesus, how did you get in? But even more, how come you're here at all? You're meant to be dead & buried!'

True by that stage the empty tomb had already been discovered - Jesus had already appeared to Mary Magdalene - but the disciples were still wrestling with the implications of it all - they had yet to fully take on board that Jesus was alive.

Jesus came and said to them, "**Peace be with you**". Literally, he said "**Shalom**". "**Shalom**" was and still is a customary Eastern greeting: it is the equivalent to our "Good Morning", or more fittingly in this context, "Good Evening".

But was Jesus simply saying "Good evening"?

Look carefully at this passage & you'll discover that he repeated the greeting.

John tells us in v21: "**Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you'**".

Clearly there was more to this greeting than simply "Hi there, I'm back!"

This morning I want to suggest that there are four different levels of interpretation present in this simple greeting:

LEVEL 1: JESUS REASSURES HIS DISCIPLES

Peace be with you

In the first place Jesus was saying: 'Don't be afraid - I'm no ghost, it really is me. Just look at the marks of nails in my hands/wound in my side - I'm your old friend Jesus - crucified, but risen from the dead, Relax – I am with you'.

The situation here was very similar to another Easter appearance described by Luke (Lk 24.37-29), who tells us that the disciples: "**were terrified, thinking they were seeing a ghost. But he [Jesus] said to them, 'Why are you alarmed? Why are these doubts coming to your minds? Look at my hands and my feet, and see that it is I myself. Feel me, and you will know, for a ghost doesn't have flesh & bones as you can see I have'**".

I can readily understand the disciples feeling somewhat apprehensive. There was something unnerving, indeed unnatural, about the appearances of the risen Lord Jesus.

- On the one hand, the Risen Lord displays unusual non-physical powers - he is, for instance, able to pass through locked doors. Wow!
- Yet, on the other hand, he is no mere phantom - he can be touched, he can even eat.

The fact is that as Christians we may believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, but we do not believe in the physical resuscitation of Jesus.

Jesus did not come back from the grave as Lazarus came back from the grave.

When Lazarus was raised from the dead, he was the same old Lazarus. He had the same old body - a body that ultimately was going to wear out. Lazarus did not come back from the grave immortal.

But when Jesus rose from the dead, he rose immortal - never to die again.

Yes, even before he had ascended to his Father, Jesus was physically different.

- True, he was still recognisable as the Jesus with whom the disciples had walked the roads of Galilee.
- His body still bore the marks of the wounds inflicted on him at the time of his crucifixion.
- More importantly, he still had the same character and the same personality.

And yet in a way that is hard to define, his body was in the process of changing.

But as the Apostle Paul makes clear in his discussion of the resurrection of the body in 1 Cor 15, *along with the change there was continuity*.

I can understand the disciples needing reassurance: "**Peace be with you**" - 'It's OK, it's me. Just relax – all is well!'

What a difference it must have made to the disciples once they realised that it was indeed the Lord - they must have been over the moon with excitement when Jesus greeted them. You can almost imagine them bouncing up & down with joy.

There is perhaps no lamer verse in Scripture than John's statement "**the disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord**" (v20). They must have been ecstatic with joy – 'Jesus, you really are alive!'

But let's not just speak of Jesus in the past. Let me remind you that Jesus is alive today. Here is cause for joy for us, his disciples, today.

This morning we have not come to remember a dead Saviour - we have come to worship a living Lord!

Yes, Jesus is here this morning. In the words of an old hymn we used to sing:

'Jesus stand among us/ in your risen power;/ let this time of worship/ be a hallowed hour'! (BPW 88)

Jesus is alive. There is nothing which can ever separate us from his love!

LEVEL 2: THE CRUCIFIED SAVIOUR OFFERS PEACE

Peace be with you

When Jesus greeted his disciples, he wanted to do more than simply reassure them of his presence. There were deeper concerns he had to address.

How I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall prior to Jesus' appearing among them.

- No doubt there was a good deal of discussion going on about the empty tomb and the alleged appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene. Was it really true? How could these things be
- But I could well imagine that disciples had also been *reflecting on the events of Good Friday* - & not just reflecting, but blaming one another, indeed probably blaming themselves.

The fact is that it was not just a fear-filled room, it was also a *guilt-filled room* into which Jesus stepped.

The very sight of Jesus must have intensified that sense of guilt - for they had all deserted him at the hour of his greatest need - they had all forsaken him & fled.

In such a context Jesus said: "**Peace be with you**". John adds: "**After saying this, he showed them his hands and his side**".

I am sure that John, if not the disciples in the Upper Room, saw here deep significance. Jesus was not simply greeting his disciples - he was offering peace to the guilty. He was able to offer peace, precisely because he had dealt with our sin & guilt by dying on the Cross.

At this stage the disciples probably could not have understood the full significance of what Jesus was doing.

At the most, as they saw the prints of the nails, they might have remembered the cry "**Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do**"?

But in his First Letter John was able to work out more fully the implications of the Cross

- "**The blood of Jesus his Son purifies us from all sin**" (1.7)
- "**If anyone does sin, we have someone who pleads with the Father on our behalf - Jesus Christ, the righteous one. And Christ himself is the means by which our sins are forgiven, and not our sins only, but also the sins of everyone**" (2.1-2).

Yes as Jesus showed them his hands and his side, he was offering peace which had been gained at the cost of his self-sacrifice upon the Cross.

In the words of one commentator: *Jesus bestows upon them "the peace of reconciliation to God made possible by his passion, the peace of the justified sinner"* (RVG Tasker).

To a group of guilty men Jesus proclaimed peace.

In effect Jesus was saying: *'I love you, in spite of everything. I forgive you - peace be with you'*.

At this point the greeting of Jesus leaps across the boundaries of time & becomes relevant to us. For the crucified Saviour who proclaimed peace then, still proclaims his peace to guilty men & women today.

To be more personal: *the crucified Christ offers peace to you & me.*

Maybe you've come to church feeling a sense of guilt - you feel you've let Jesus down - indeed, you know you've let him down:

- you perhaps failed to stand up for him at work
- you lost your cool at home & spoilt your witness
- in one way or another you have failed to follow Jesus.

But Jesus still says to you & to me, "**Peace be with you**".

The Good News of the Gospel is that Jesus is still able to deal with our sin & guilt.

In Charles Wesley's words,

"He breaks the power of cancelled sin, / he sets the prisoner free;

his blood can make the foulest clean; / his blood availed for me"

No wonder the disciples "**were filled with joy at seeing the Lord**" (v20).

There is nothing more precious than having "**peace with God**" (see Rom 5.1)

LEVEL 3: THE RISEN LORD OFFERS PEACE

Peace be with you

But there is yet more to be unpacked in this simple greeting. For the person who stood before them was not just the crucified Saviour, but *the risen Lord*.

The wounded hands and side were evidence not only that he had died for them, but also that he had risen from the dead. This was no ghost - Jesus was really alive.

"**Peace be with you**": I.e. forget your fears of arrest, imprisonment, death - *I am with you, whatever the future may hold*.

Perhaps it was in that very same room that the disciples had eaten bread and drunk wine with Jesus the previous Thursday.

On that occasion Jesus had looked forward beyond the Cross.

- He had spoken of the promised gift of the Spirit, the one who would draw alongside them to help them in their weakness, the one who would be as it were the 'presence of Jesus in his absence'.
- He had gone on to declare: "**I have told you this so that you will have peace by being united to me. The world will make you suffer. But be brave! I have defeated the world!**" (John 16.33).

Now again he offers his disciples **peace** - but this time the Cross is behind him and the victory has been won. In the words of another commentator: "*He displays to them his wounds, less to establish his identity than that their joy might be fulfilled by the sight of his victory over the world*" (Sir Edwyn Hoskyns).

Here again the words of Jesus are relevant to us.

For there are times when we are fearful of what the future may hold for us

True, we may not be fearful of persecution or of arrest – we may be fearful for our children or our parents; we may have fears relating to our job or our finances.

In this context hear the words of the risen Lord Jesus: "**Peace be with you!**"

The good news is that Jesus is with us, - and as a result we can face even the very worst that life has to offer. In the midst of all the storms & turmoil of life, we can know an

inner tranquillity - we are not alone - Jesus, the Risen Lord, is with us

Yes: *"The storm may roar without me, / my heart may low be laid,
but God is round about me, / and can I be dismayed?"*

LEVEL 4: THE RISEN BUT WOUNDED LORD OFFERS PEACE

Peace be with you

Is there yet another level? I believe there is.

Maybe this level was not present in the disciples' minds - maybe it was not even present in John's mind as he wrote his Gospel - but nonetheless it is a level present as with the Spirit's aid we reflect on that incident of long ago.

I wish to suggest that the wound marks of Jesus are not just reminders of past suffering, but also of present suffering too. In the words of one preacher: *"They tell us, as no words could tell us more plainly, that the sufferings of this world, the cries of the distressed since the world began and until it ends, are echoed always in the very heart of God in heaven itself. God suffers because we suffer. He is a compassionate God, he suffers with (this is what the word means). So the cross of Christ is not only an event in history, it is a proclamation of what God is like for all eternity"* (Cleverly Ford).

I find it significant that when Jesus rose victorious from the grave, the marks of the wounds were still with him. Is it too much to believe that the Ascended Lord in glory still bears the marks of those wounds?

In other words, in rising from the dead and in ascending to his Father in heaven Jesus does not suddenly become oblivious to the hardships of life.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews once put it this way: **"Our High Priest is not one who cannot feel sympathy for our weaknesses. On the contrary, we have a High Priest who was tempted in every way that we are, but did not sin. Let us have confidence, then, and approach God's throne where there is grace. There we will receive mercy and find grace to help us just when we need it"** (Hebs 4.15,16).

Jesus knows, Jesus understands. He can enter into our hurts and disappointments.

What a wonderful thought! Even now Jesus is entering into our deepest feelings. What **"peace"** this brings. We may be misunderstood by others, but by Jesus never. For even now Jesus carries on his body the scars of his suffering

Jesus came & stood among them. 'Peace be with you', he said" (v19)

- Here is a word of peace to the frightened
- A word of peace to the guilty
- A word of peace to those battered by life's storms
- A word of peace to the hurting

No wonder the disciples **"were filled with joy at seeing the Lord"**
Jesus makes all the difference to our lives!