

Behind locked doors

Please read: John 20 v 1-18 (which was last Sunday's reading)

Now sit quietly for 2 minutes, and pray these words by William Pennefather (1816-73);

*Jesus stand among us in thy risen power:
Let this time of worship be a hallowed hour.
Breathe the Holy Spirit into every heart;
bid the fears and sorrows from each soul depart.
Thus with quickened footsteps we pursue our way,
watching for the dawning of eternal day. Amen*

Now read : **John 20 v 19-23**

Open our eyes Lord that we may see wonderful things in your Word...

We continue on from last week. A few preliminary details are important before we step out into the heart of our journey for today.

This is the evening of that first Easter Sunday – the day Jesus rose from the dead.

John, who wrote this gospel, had already experienced something powerful earlier in the day (20:8). From the evidence of the grave clothes, **he believed** that God's power was at work, but still he lacked full understanding (20:9).

John is in this room in the evening with nine other disciples. Perhaps this is the same room where Jesus had broken bread and shared wine with them. They are notably scared. They sense serious persecution could arrive at the door at any moment. Judas Iscariot has gone forever. Thomas is also missing. Where is Thomas? Could it be that he has gone out alone for essential supplies? Possibly like you or I might do during this present virus lock down, may be Thomas just slipped out to quickly buy what was needed to get them through the next couple of days. He is not present and this proved to be crucial. (v 24).

The doors are locked. Fear reigns in their hearts. Are they about to lose their lives?

Into this situation, with all its paralysing and crippling fear, Jesus appears and stands among them in his risen power. Locked doors are no barrier to his entry. These disciples will now **see for themselves** that Mary's report (20:18) had been true.

The first thing to note is Jesus's greeting and the bestowal of peace. To men who had fled from Jesus's side when he was arrested this must have brought healing and relief . These men knew they were all guilty of desertion. They had failed their Master grievously. And yet here Jesus is, standing among them, and his **first word** to them is "Peace."

Any fears that they have of being rebuked and cast aside by a deeply hurt and disappointed Jesus simply melt away. All their aching anguish and distress vanishes like a puff of smoke which vacates the room as quickly as Jesus had entered it. He brings and shares “**Peace.**”

The Baptist biblical scholar Bruce Milne’s words are very helpful;

*Shalom, the familiar Hebrew greeting, is a considerably richer notion than mere absence of stress, which tends to be our understanding of peace today. In its OT context, shalom basically means “wellbeing” in the fullest sense. It gathers up **all the blessings of the kingdom of God**; shalom is life at its best under the gracious hand of God. (my emphasis)*

When Jesus bestows this greeting, he is bestowing on them the peace of healing, complete forgiveness, deliverance from all fear, and the assurance of the love of God. Jesus is wrapping each disciple in grace and mercy. The peace he freely brings and shares flows powerfully from the wounds in his own body which they can now see. The peace he bestows now on this Sunday evening complements his cry “It is finished” uttered from the cross (19:30) the previous Friday afternoon.

Friends, isn’t it amazing to know that our gospel begins with bringing **peace**? This is precisely what Jesus freely gives to us and generously bestows upon us. What cost him so much is given freely to us. The supply of peace that comes out of his wounds is endless. It is the peace that passes all human understanding and which guards our hearts and our minds (Philippians 4:7). It is all in Christ! Can I put it like this? The peace that Jesus brought to his shaken and traumatised disciples, **and which he brings to us**, is of a completely different order. It is my friends, quite simply, the true peace of the kingdom of God. And Jesus bestowed it upon his weak and undeserving disciples in their hour of need. He also bestows it upon us. We receive what we do not deserve. Peace with grace – from Jesus.

One of the great outcomes of the resurrection is peace. We have peace because we have the risen Jesus amongst us and in us. Have you ever noticed when the apostle Paul wrote to his Churches or his companions Timothy and Titus, **he always began** with a greeting which highlighted two things; peace and grace. (eg: Colossians 1:2, Ephesians 1:2, 1 Tim 1 :2, Titus 1:4). Peace is the beginning and the end of our wonderful gospel! Grace secures it.

After bestowing peace upon them, he then deliberately shows the disciples his **wounds**. As the hymn writer puts it, “rich wounds yet visible”. Jesus is assuring the disciples that it is really him. There is to be no mistaken identity. I am he who was crucified on Friday. Any lingering doubts about the reality of Jesus’s bodily resurrection are being swept away!

However, and this is the really important point for us today; the wounds of Jesus also reveal to us a God who has tasted the bitter cup of severe pain and suffering. As we seriously consider and meditate upon the hands, feet and side of Jesus, we are powerfully reminded that the Jesus we love and follow understands suffering. Like *no other God*, he can come alongside all who suffer. His wounds bear rich evidence of his own pain-filled experiences. He tasted mental and physical torture, including that horrible sense of God-forsakenness.

One of the most moving passages I have ever read from a book based on the death of Jesus, comes from John Stott's "The Cross of Christ." It is worth quoting it in full;

*I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the One Nietzsche ridiculed as God on a cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged into God-forsaken darkness. **That is the God for me!** He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. **Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his.**" (my emphasis) The Cross of Christ p 333-334*

Friends, this is why we too need to look at the wounds of Jesus. In the Protestant Churches we have often brushed over this idea of meditating upon the wounds of our Saviour. We must never do that. We must gaze upon those "rich wounds yet visible" and worship the Lamb who was slain for us. On the prayer sheet today, you will find Edward Shilito's poem on the scars of Jesus. He witnessed the horrors of World War I. Please read it carefully. Your peace is possible because of Jesus's scars, blood and sacrificial death. (Colossians 1:20)

These are the important things that the apostle John recalled about that unforgettable Sunday evening. But he did not only remember the **wounds which he and the others personally saw**. He also remembered, and thank God for this, **the breath which he felt**. He saw something (the wounds of Jesus) and he felt something (the breath of Jesus).

There was a point in this Easter meeting when there was a distinct pause, and then Jesus exhaled breath upon them all. His breath was the life of the Spirit which he bid them receive. The disciples were receiving, in anticipation of Pentecost, the breath of life, the breath of the Spirit of Jesus, who is the Holy Spirit. One is reminded of OT passages such as Genesis 2:7 and Ezekiel 37:5. The breath of God bringing life and power.

Jesus spoke to his disciples about what their main task would be. They would be sent out into the world to take the good news of the gospel of forgiveness and new life. This is still the greatest task of the Church, and **our** vital calling. The Church is *sent* into the world, with instructions from God and under his authority. Just as Jesus had been sent by the Father into the world to save it (3:16-17), so now the disciples of the risen Jesus are to be sent out to take good news of his saving love into the whole world. This passage bears striking similarities to the famous great commission at the very end of Matthews gospel (Matthew 28 v 18-20).

Nothing has changed friends! The Church, with all of its missionary members, including you and me, is sent out to share the good news about Jesus's death and resurrection, and to offer forgiveness to the world through Christ and by the merits of his death (20:23). The gift of forgiveness with wonderful reconciliation to God can be embraced or rejected, but the

Church must offer it to absolutely everyone! And we do all this with the new life of the Spirit and with the authority of Jesus. Jesus gives his disciples both life and authority.

Some scholars have described John 20 v 21-23 as John's Pentecost. This is not the case. This was **not** Pentecost or John's version of it. That was to come 50 days later and is described by Luke in Acts Chapter 2. John was present here and 50 days later. We have two separate memorable experiences and incidents. This is the *first Sunday evening*. John remembers it well. He remembered the peace of Christ being bestowed not once but twice (v 19 & 21). Firstly, bestowed for sake of grace, peace and forgiveness; secondly bestowed for mission, for they were to "go forth with peace and joy to love and serve the Lord" – as we should do after our worship gatherings!

John also remembered the welling up and overflowing of joy during that evening. Fear was vanquished in the presence of Jesus. Joy filled their souls. Memorable joy! (20:20)

Finally, John recalled feeling the "breath of Jesus"; the life of God truly touched him and the others that night. He received the gentle breath of new life, but he, like the others would not receive the dynamic power of the Spirit until after Jesus had ascended (Acts 1) and the day of Pentecost had arrived (Acts 2). The mission would not start until after then, but he and the others had received *a foretaste* of what lay ahead. What had come upon them through gentle exhalation that night, would come like a mighty wind from heaven at Pentecost (Acts 2:2) and be accompanied with tongues of fire! Then their tongues and hearts really would be set on fire to witness!

Just one little problem remained. One side-issue. Thomas had missed out. We will come back to him next week. His turn would come.

Dear friends, in closing; **receive** the "peace of the Lord Jesus Christ." He is risen! Know that you follow the God who understands and comes alongside sufferers in a way no other person can or even claims to do. He suffered for you. He suffers with you. He alone is Emmanuel – God with us.

Know also the joy that comes to fruition as the fear of death, and the fear of anything else dissipates before his risen power and glorious hope. Death has lost its sting. Fear is consumed by the light and love of Jesus. All hail the power of Jesus name!

And be ready to be sent out with peace and joy, filled with the life breath of the Spirit of Jesus, to share with a needy and suffering world the good news of the Kingdom of God.

Amen.

Imagine in a few moments of quietness that you are in Church with all your friends. Close your eyes and picture the fellowship of believers. Think about the faces in the congregation. Then pray once again,

*Jesus stand among us in thy risen power, let this time of worship be a hallowed hour. Breathe the Holy Spirit into every heart, bid the fear and sorrows from our souls depart. **THUS WITH QUICKENED FOOTSTEPS** we'll pursue our way, watching for the dawning of eternal day. I trust your hearts have been quickened by his Word. Amen*