

Easter 2 - Cathedral 16 April 2023

John 20:21 “Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you”.

When we consider the disciples, during this Easter season, caught in a degree of post-Resurrection confusion, as they come to the knowledge of Christ's rising, we find that inevitable cracks in the credulity of some of them, notably Thomas, are opening – and who can blame Thomas, or any other of the disciples? Those who have lived on one level of relationship with Jesus are now being asked to assume a different relationship. It has its negative aspects as Mary Magdalene found when she was prevented from embracing Jesus in the garden by the tomb, but this is really about positive affirmation, unapologetic proclamation – more than acceptance, what is required by the disciples is obedience. What an unfashionable word for a world that likes us to make up our own minds, but obedience is a crucial word for this day, as Thomas doubts, and all struggle with the enormity of the miracle that has restored their Lord into their midst. The same Jesus says the words, “Peace be with you, as the Father has sent me, so I send you”.

These are words for us to hear in the moments of doubt in our own lives. When we look into the gloom, whatever gloom may be for us, maybe simply considering our own mortality in the quiet of our solitary thought; maybe in considering the young lives lost in the midst of earthquake, war, famine or disease? Where is the eternal message of Christ? Where the moment of Mary Magdalene's revelation; where the honest doubt of Thomas? Where the confusion and misunderstanding of the disciples walking the Emmaus road? Obedience is more vital to our faith than we may reckon, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you”. “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put your hand, and place it in my side.....”

“Easter”, “Resurrection”, “Alleluia” are amongst the great words of this joyful season, but, let us recall today that with the victory of Christ over sin and death, came the commission to make disciples of all nations. We are sent, as the disciples were sent. The quality of Christ's peace that we share week by week in Church, is not the peace of a comfortable armchair or warm bed, nor even the peace of holiday and freedom from work; it is the peace that passes our understanding. The peace is of an order and quality as of no other. It is the kind of inner peace that has been arrived at through trial, or failure or pain - maybe all of them (just think of the disciples of Jesus at the time of our Lord's arrest) and is a gift from the Son of God, who through the Cross allows us to see light in the midst of darkness.

Even in these extraordinary days of international concern and fear and as we witness the suffering of so many thousands of people, there is the strength and peace that we experience in the person of the risen Christ, and come to recognise in others who possess it through their faith too. The faith is realised through the extraordinarily powerful path of obedience to the words of Christ.

I recall, quite a number of years ago now, being struck by the fact that the then Pope John Paul II, who suffered a very lengthy decline in health, in his last lucid hours

asked for those parts of the Gospels to be read to him that spoke of our Lord's journey to the Cross. I was struck because in the Easter season and in the face of death, the Resurrection accounts would be, to my mind, the most obvious choice. But I was wrong, and I think I begin to see why, for surely the words of hope were not what he sought in those last moments of conscious reflection (those he held within himself), what he sought was the encounter with the physical, mental and spiritual wounds of Christ; by his stripes we are healed. The obedience of the Son to the Father even unto death on the Cross, "Not my will, but yours be done."

None of this detracts from the joy of the Resurrection narratives, rather they are enhanced, as the wounds of Christ are exposed, seen and, as nearly as possible, felt. Today as we try and absorb the enormity of human suffering in the light of the Resurrection, our way may be helped by Thomas who wanted to finger the marks of the nails..... then found he need not.....

The words of hope spoken into a world of deep anxiety bring us to attend closely to the sufferings of our own times, and the Church has ever found itself as the purveyor of such hope as we hold today, no matter what the outward circumstances of society. But not platitudes; not a hope that is nothing but words.

At much the same time as Pope John Paul II was lying dying, the Archbishop of Canterbury of the time, Rowan Williams articulated this in a post Easter letter to political leaders, saying: there are major areas of human concern that need to be addressed in our Society; the disengagement and alienation of people without hope, roots or direction, the environmental crisis that remains like a time bomb for future generations and the politics of negativity (of playing upon people's fears and anxieties).

Nearly twenty years later and still the ratcheting of fear is an instrument of suppression of hope for many peoples, from the encircling of Taiwan to the missile testing of North Korea, from the beheading of a prisoner to the threatening walls of separation, and dissemination of sensitive and secretive documents.

If we want to discover how to hold the Christian hope in the midst of this appalling catalogue of human failure, then let us read and pray with attentiveness; attentiveness of God; attentiveness to the news of what is going on around us; attentiveness to those closest to us, with whom we share our lives; and attentiveness to ourselves - not in a narcissistic way, but in the way of quiet acceptance of the peace of Christ, offered to the disciples this day and to us as well.

What we need to hear of first importance today by way of attentiveness to our call and the place of God in our lives, are the words of the risen Jesus to his disciples; for we are a sent people, a people whose peace lies in Christ. As the disciples found, life becomes more meaningful as the following and the sending of our Lord is seen to be closely associated with his risen life; obedience brings direction, simplicity of thought and vision; peace of a kind that we can never fully understand, though we know that something wonderful is happening to us. A peace that we share across the ages, both here and to the eternity of our everlasting Eucharistic fellowship.

Christ's peace is a free gift, as, indeed, is that of life itself. Alleluia, he is risen indeed, and still he stands in our midst; his wounds exposed, but with the call clear as it was to those early disciples: "Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you".

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