

24 April 2022

Acts 5:27-32
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20:19-31

Writing this sermon just ahead of Anzac Day, and with our daily news filled with images and stories about the devastating and brutal war in Ukraine, the word that stands out in the story of Jesus' dramatic resurrection appearances to the disciples is "peace". We certainly need it

It is not just the recollection of devastating international conflict in the past and the present that powerfully brings to mind the need for peace. Just a few days ago I was chatting to a friend who owns a retail outlet, and he was telling me of how the past two years of the pandemic have taken a huge toll, because he has never experienced so much hate directed towards him and his employees. We need peace.

But of course, these are not the kind of peace that Jesus announces to his startled friends on that first Easter day.

For the disciples that first Easter day was spent in a state of fear. They are in fear of their Jewish brethren in Judea and their leaders.

They have seen Jesus arrested, tried, flogged, and dying on a cross. His dead body has been placed in a tomb.

The disciples fear the consequences of being implicated in Jesus' crime, and this crime is centred in Jerusalem, the home of the temple. As far as the Jewish leaders are concerned Jesus' crime was that he was speaking and acting apparently in opposition to the Torah (the Law) and to the Temple, and by doing so leading people astray. He was, in other words, a false prophet. Further; his action in the Temple was a blow against this central symbol of national life and also of God's presence with his people. The Jewish leaders could see that Jesus regarded himself as, in some sense, Messiah and thus could become the focus of serious revolutionary

activity. This made him a political nuisance, whose actions might well call down the wrath of Rome upon Temple and nation alike.¹

The disciples fear that they are going to be implicated with Jesus, and thus that they will suffer much the same kind of fate as their beloved leader – arrest, trial, even death.

So here we find them, on the evening of that first Easter day, cowering behind locked doors out of fear of their Jewish brethren.

And into the midst of this steps Jesus with a word of peace: “Peace be with you.” This is perhaps a sort of peace that many of us can identify with; the sort of peace that comes when our worst fears are not realised; the relief at finding that this is not one of the Jewish leaders come to do his worst. But much more than this, this is the relief that against all odds, death has not won; the profound realisation that out of the blood, the nails, the thorns, the beating and the cross has come this miraculous new life and hope in the person of the risen Jesus.²

Jesus shows them his hands and his side. This truly is the man they thought forever lost restored to them. And they react with euphoria, the adrenaline rush that follows the miraculous – the Crucified One turns out now to be also the Risen One. You can imagine the shouting and leaping and dancing. Something completely unexpected, completely outside of their understanding, has taken place. You can imagine, not only the wondering at how this could be, but also the sense that now anything is possible; if Jesus is risen, then who or what should they fear. With this power among them, they could take on the world!

And into this euphoria Jesus speaks another word of peace: “Peace be with you.”³ Perhaps this is a kind of “not so fast”, “don’t get ahead of yourselves”, word. This is the kind of peace that lasts beyond the initial rush, the kind of peace that abides even when one remembers the cost and the challenges that still lie ahead. “As the

¹ Wright, *Victory*, pp.548-9, 551.

² Crouch

³ The following is adapted from Crouch.

Father has sent me, so I send you.” Sobering words, even when they see the living Christ, since they have also just been shown his wounds.

How was Jesus sent? He was sent into the world as the suffering servant.

“Well then, in the same way, I send you ...,” Jesus says.

The victory won by Messiah Jesus will be theirs as well, but it is not the kind of victory that is then a battering ram to use to crush opposition and challenge. The victory of Messiah Jesus will be theirs as well, but in order to get there they will need the kind of peace that abides even when – in the midst of their own blood, thorns, and cross – victory seems but a dim and distant possibility.

“As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” The point of Jesus giving them the Holy Spirit is so that they can do, in and for the whole world, what Jesus has been doing in Israel. In first century Palestine Jesus’ message made sense – and hence caused the conflict leading to his death there. But how does it get translated into, and spread into, other cultures and peoples who aren’t steeped in Torah and Temple, who aren’t thinking about God’s kingdom, who aren’t waiting for a Messiah? Remember that God’s covenant with his people Israel has always been with the purpose of bringing the whole world into the blessing of a restored relationship with the creator of all.⁴

Jesus’ message gets translated and spread by being incarnated into all the world’s cultures through his followers in every age.

So the disciples are called and commissioned and equipped to start the process of taking God’s salvation into all the world. What Jesus has achieved, they are now to implement and multiply in others.

They are to pronounce, in God’s name and by his spirit, the message of forgiveness to all who believe in Jesus. Jesus said, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Now we tend to think immediately in moral terms and to think that this means that the disciples (and we, the church, coming after them) have a kind of judicial authority: a special power to *decide* whose sins will be forgiven and whose will not. But the force of Jesus’

⁴ Wright, *John*, 149.

commissioning here is one in which the disciples are sent to make known the love of God that Jesus has made known – the message of forgiveness. And there is the flip side of this, the recognition that some will not believe, will not come to repent and turn to God through Jesus. As Tom Wright says, the disciples are “to warn the world that sin is a serious, deadly disease, and that to remain in it will bring death. They are to rebuke and warn – not because they don’t like people, or because they are seeking power or prestige for themselves, but because this is God’s message to a muddled, confused and still rebellious world.”⁵

They are to be, as it is described at the beginning of Revelation, “a kingdom and priests”. Israel’s task is now vested in the disciples; it is vested in us.

God’s message of forgiveness is carried, not by those drunk on the euphoria of power and victory, but by those who have first found themselves forgiven, and who then follow their master to suffering and a dying-to-self. These people who are described as a kingdom and priests in Revelation are suffering persecution as they go about being just that.

The third “Peace be with you” comes a week later and is addressed to Thomas. Poor Thomas has, down the ages, been given a bad press: because of this story he is known as “doubting Thomas” and has been portrayed in Sunday School lessons as someone with a bit of a character flaw because he is sceptical about the resurrection of Jesus.

But this is unfair.

We don’t know much about Thomas. But while we don’t know much about him, we can understand that his doubts are justified. Resurrection was not something Thomas or anyone else expected. Bodily life after death for an individual was not something that was contained within the worldview of the peoples of that land at that time. Those groups who did hold hope for a resurrection believed in a *general* resurrection at the end of the age, in which all the faithful would be raised to new life in the new age of God’s reign. *No one* expected the resurrection of an individual ahead of that event. They were not expecting Jesus to rise ahead of everyone else.

⁵ Wright, *John*, 150-151. See also Johnson.

The other disciples have already seen Jesus, resurrected, alive-but-transformed. Thomas had missed out on that astonishing and completely unexpected event: it is not unreasonable that he remains unconvinced until he has satisfied himself that this is no ghost and no impostor.

One might imagine the tension in the room. Thomas's disbelief in the testimony of his fellow disciples probably brought about a bit of sense of division.⁶ Jesus enters the room again, and again says "Peace be with you". And in this "peace be with you" word is not only one or more of the earlier meanings repeated again for Thomas's benefit, but also perhaps a sense of the peace of forgiveness between them, the restoration of the full community of oneness and unity among them – between Jesus and Thomas, and between Thomas and the other disciples.

"Peace be with you". This is what the risen Jesus brings. This is not just about our Anzac Day prayers for the absence of conflict, our hope for an end to the invasion of Ukraine, our longing that people would stop hating and abusing those innocently following the Government's advice and requirements during the pandemic. The Hebrew and Aramaic word for peace, "shalom", refers to much much more: it refers to wholeness, to the complete integrity and coherence of all things within the grace of God, to the wholeness of relationships between God and humankind, within humankind, and between humankind and the rest of creation.

And as the risen Jesus inaugurates this peace, and sends us into the world to be bearers and makers of this peace, so too he sets about restoring the world to the perfection of relationships that the wars and disputes of past and present show is, in this age, so profoundly lacking.

John the Evangelist concludes his account by telling us that his purpose is that we "may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that, by believing, have life in his name".

⁶ This paragraph Crouch

The matter of what is believed should not be reduced to merely what one *thinks*. When another John wrote to the churches about his vision, he was writing in a context where there were many who sought to rule, who claimed high status – even divinity – for themselves, and who demanded and brutally enforced the loyalty of the populace. But this John wrote about the one true Lord of all the world, the Alpha and Omega (beginning and end), the one to whom all the earth’s rulers would one day submit. Belief is about one’s ultimate *allegiance*.

The Greek word for “believe” also carries a strong connotation of trust. It is therefore not just about what we think: it is also about the heart. It is about being in a relationship that motivates and underpins what we then *do*. This is the kind of belief that is expressed in a willingness to take risks.⁷

John the Evangelist writes that his purpose is that we “may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that, by believing, have life in his name”. When John speaks here of life, he is using a particular Greek word – *zoe*. It carries with it the sense of “life of the age to come”, “life in the deepest purposes of God”, “life of the Holy Spirit”. John uses this particular word in the opening of his Gospel too: “In him was life, and that life was the light of all people”.

In the opening of his Gospel, John has talked about the Creation – “In the beginning was the Word.” Now in chapter 20 he notes that Jesus is risen on the first day of the week. Jesus’ resurrection is an act of new creation for the renewal of all creation under God’s loving purpose.

In that locked room on the first day of the week, new creation began. The peace Jesus brought, our transformation, was so that God’s purpose in the whole world could be accomplished – that all the world would come to know the one true God of love as the world’s true ruler, and to cease its rebellion. And the Holy Spirit was given to us to equip us to fulfil that costly commission.

When Jesus said ‘Peace be with you’, he wasn’t assuring his followers of a quiet life; but he was assuring us of life, *zoe*, his life of the age to come, life in the purposes of

⁷ For an extended discussion on this, see Schreiner.

God. It is ultimately in him and in this zoe that we find all the kinds of peace we need and long for.

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