

John 20.19-31

11th April 2010, Easter 2

Context

It is the evening of the first Easter day. Mary Magdalene has seen and spoken with the risen Jesus. Peter and John have seen the empty tomb and John has 'seen and believed'.

Later in the day, the mood of the disciples is a combination of FAITH and FEAR (see v19).

JESUS *does not leave them to go through the night* until he has personally revealed himself to them, reassured them and given them his peace and a new sense of purpose.

Peace

The PRINCE OF PEACE gives PEACE. He doesn't just *hope for* peace like most people do today, he *gives* peace. In fact it would be true to say that his whole purpose is to make true peace and wholeness and reconciliation – with God and with each other, possible for ALL people.

"Peace be with you!" is the key phrase in our reading (verses 19, 21 and 26).

The disciples have a personal encounter with the Prince of Peace and as well as peace he brings them three things and the promise of a fourth.

Proof

He brings them proof of the resurrection, as they – 10 of the original 12 men and perhaps some of the women too – are meeting together in a mixture of faith and fear.

He stands among them:-

- His execution and burial could not hold him
- Locked doors were no barrier to him
- Neither physical doors nor the doors of closed hearts and minds can shut Jesus out.

He shows them his wounds and, convinced that it is him, the disciples are glad.

He repeats "Peace be with you!" This is not just a friendly greeting; it is a *statement of fact* = "Peace is now yours!" It is of course *because of* the wounds he shows them, that they now have peace. As Isaiah 53.5 famously prophesies:

By his wounds we are healed.

The wounds of Christ are the proof of his resurrection, his victory over sin and death which brings us peace.

Purpose and Pattern

Then in verse 21 Jesus talks about the kind of peace he has given them and the purpose of it. He has given them peace for a reason and it is not just so that they can lie back on the sun loungers sipping cocktails... Jesus tells them:-

Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.

This is John's version of the Great Commission. What does it mean for Jesus to send the disciples *as the Father has sent Jesus*?

- Like Jesus, the truth is revealed *to them* and *through them*
- Like Jesus, they are given authority to heal, to forgive and to reconcile

This is their PURPOSE. St Paul makes the same point in 2 Corinthians 5.18-19:-

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

The fact that the disciples' mission is the same as the mission of Jesus means that as well as a clear purpose, they also have a clear PATTERN to follow:-

- A pattern of living in obedience to God's rules and values
- A pattern of touching untouchables, healing the sick, fighting against evil
- A pattern of unselfishness, laying down their lives for their neighbours, including those they see as their enemies

As the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus sends Peter and James and John ... and you and me and us. We have a purpose and we have a pattern to follow.

What else do we need? What are we waiting for?

Power is promised

Verse 22 tells us that Jesus *breathed on them and said, 'receive the Holy Spirit...*

I don't think they actually received the Holy Spirit at this moment – the book of Acts tells us they had to wait until Pentecost. What we seem to have here is an

ACTED PARABLE, just like the footwashing before the Last Supper prophesies sins being washed away.

Along with the promise of the power of the Holy Spirit comes (in verse 23) a clarification of their mission as one of forgiveness and reconciliation:-

If you forgive the sins of anyone, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.

This verse is not a licence for any Church to decide to forgive or to withhold forgiveness from anybody. It is actually a warning to the apostles and their successors (us) about the consequences of their preaching or failing to preach:-

My paraphrase of verse 23 is *If you pass on to people the forgiveness of God, they will be freed from the power their sin has over them. If you fail to do so, they'll still remain slaves to their sin.*

People need to hear and receive the grace and forgiveness of God and it is through the disciples, the followers of Jesus that they are going to hear and receive it.

Surely, if we take the Lord's Prayer seriously, it also has to be about giving people our forgiveness for the ways that they have wronged us. *Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us* is what we pray daily, weekly.

The point is not that we have the RIGHT to withhold forgiveness, it is that we have the RESPONSIBILITY to give it.

- The greatest need in our world today is for reconciliation between people and each other and between people and God
- As far as I can see the New Testament never teaches that *God needs* to be reconciled to us.
- God's problem is not primarily with SINNERS but with SIN.
- When God looks at us he doesn't just see PERPETRATORS of evil who need to be PUNISHED, he sees PRISONERS of evil who need to be SET FREE (this includes those who 'do' as well as those who are 'done to').

God has forgiven us all and has achieved this freedom for us all in Christ and it is our key responsibility to show it to and share it with all people.

Conclusion

So how are we doing at St George's?

- How is our faith/fear balance?

- What locked doors do we still have? Well Jesus can cope with locked doors. He can unlock them or he can walk right through them!
- What do we do when we are confused and afraid (or bothered and bewildered)?
- Do we still meet together to pray and wait for God to reveal himself or do we wander off like 'doubting' Thomas?
- Are we still looking for proof?
- Are we clear about our purpose, our mission, the pattern we have to follow?
- Have we received the power?
- Do we know his peace and are we sharing it freely, bringing forgiveness and reconciliation?

Our purpose at St George's is to grow together in all these ways. This is what we are trying to achieve in all our courses, programmes and events like our coming weekend away. This is what you are part of and what God may be calling you to join in with, wholeheartedly.