

Sunday 19 April 2020: Isolation and Resurrection

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Second Sunday of Easter.

Readings: [Acts 2.14a, 22-32](#); [1 Peter 1.1-12](#)

Like the disciples in our Gospel reading we are meeting behind locked doors. For the past month, the doors of St Paul's have been firmly shut. Our lives of faith have turned from a publicly lived-out faith to one that is lived introspectively. The doors of our homes, too, have been shut, as we have adapted to working from home and reduced our contact with others to an absolute minimum. This Easter-tide, more than any others, we have come to know what the disciples would have felt as they stayed at home, shut in their room. We have come to share some of their isolation; some of us may have come to share some of their hopelessness. We may share some of their lack of faith in the future.

And into this hopelessness, and uncertainty, comes Jesus. The risen Lord Jesus is not bound by the locked doors of the disciples' room, nor is he limited by the locked doors of our own places of isolation. On the evening of the day of the resurrection, we read in John's Gospel, Jesus breaks through the barriers that we, his disciples, have put in place for very valid reasons, and he speaks to us. The disciples were meeting behind locked doors for fear of reprisal, were fearful for their own lives. If their Master and Teacher had been condemned to die in this cruel way, what about them? Would they, too, be captured and killed? *We* are meeting behind locked doors for fear of infection, are similarly fearful for our own lives. If the Coronavirus spreads exponentially, then how are each of us safe from the risk of infection. If people are dying in our nation, then what about us?

Today's Gospel reading, then, speaks to both the followers of Jesus in his own age, and to us. Speaks to all who struggle with their lives of faith in the light of fear for their lives. Speaks to all who struggle with their lives of faith in the light of hardship: whether that be the hardship of having lost a loved one, as the disciples had lost their beloved Master, or the hardship of persecution. Whether that be the hardship of having lost a livelihood or the hardship of having to redefine work and family lives from the four walls of our homes. The risen Jesus, our gospel reading tells us, steps right into those locked spaces to be with us. John does not tell how Jesus came to be in the midst of the disciples: he gives us no details as to how he entered the room. The risen Jesus, John implies, is not limited by our own limitations. He is able to be in our midst, even when we self-isolate behind locked doors. Just as he appeared among his disciples in the locked room where they had sought safety.

Jesus appears among his followers and he gifts them the gift of peace. There are no rebukes in this first encounter following the betrayal in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus does not bear grudges against his disciples, but instead greets them with the greeting of peace. The gift of peace that Jesus bestows on his friends, is the very peace that he spoke about at the

meal they had shared on the day before his death: 'peace I leave you, my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give you', he had then said. The peace I give you, is a peace that is not at all dependent on external circumstances. *Then* Jesus had told the disciples, 'in the world you have fear, but fear not, I have overcome the world'. The peace that Jesus gifts is with us regardless of the terrors and fears the world may throw at us. Jesus' gift of peace is given not as a sign that things might be better, or less painful in the future. Jesus' gift of peace is given to assure us that our relationship with him, and through him our relationship with the Father who sent him, is set right once and for all. The gift of peace that Jesus gives his disciples is intricately linked to his passion, is the fruit of resurrection, our Gospel reading suggests.

Jesus proclaims peace to his disciples and shows them his wounded hands and side. Jesus gifts peace, and points to the marks that the battle for eternal peace with God, have left on his own body. In his resurrection body he still carries these marks of the passion. And as Christians, we believe that he continues to carry these marks of suffering and death, as today he sits at the right hand of God in glory. When he returns in judgement, to gift the eternal peace he has come to bring to this world, the world will know him to be the crucified Jesus and risen Lord by the wounds in his hands, feet and side. As Charles Wesley put it so evocatively in his carol, 'those dear tokens of his passion, still his dazzling body bears'. For us, who share the gift of faith, these marks are our assurance that the resurrection is real and physical. That is why, when he comes in his glory to bring in his kingdom, the marks of the passion will be 'cause of endless exultation' for us, 'his ransomed worshippers', as Wesley puts it so powerfully in his hymn.

The peace that the risen Jesus gifts is the result of his death and resurrection, and now he shares that gift with his friends. All those assembled behind the locked doors, the women and men who had followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, receive the gift of peace. As a sign of the conveying of that peace, and the equipping of his followers for the work of making *known* that peace in the frightened world in which they live, Jesus breathes on them. On the cross, as he breathed his last, he gave up his spirit, we read in John's gospel. Here, he gifts his spirit to the disciples: 'receive the Holy Spirit for the work of making known the peace of God to this world', he commissions them. 'Receive the Holy Spirit so that sins may be forgiven, and people made right with God'. Receive the Holy Spirit who gifts us a peace that is beyond all understanding, all hoping and longing. Behind the locked doors of their room, God remakes his world: his beloved Son, the first begotten from the dead, sends out the creative Spirit that equips the people of faith throughout the ages to undertake the costly and often difficult work of reconciliation: 'Receive the Holy Spirit: if you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven'.

These words are spoken to all the disciples assembled, and they are therefore for all Christian people. While the church has included the commandment to forgive or retain sins in the service of ordination of priests, this ministry is not restricted to us priests alone. Nor is it restricted to the apostles alone, as the story of Thomas shows. Just because Thomas was not present when Christ shared his Spirit does not mean that he did not come to share apostolic

ministry. And so, we all, all baptised people, have a share in the ministry of reconciliation: we all may forgive the sins that are committed against us, may retain the sins that are committed against us. Just as we may seek forgiveness of our own sins from one another and from God. The gift of reconciliation is given to the abiding body of Christ through the ages, and in order to equip and sustain us for this ministry of forgiveness, we are given God's Holy Spirit in our lives. By our ministry of reconciliation, by our showing forth God's love in this world, by our work to make visible God's peace in our world, we are known as disciples. As followers in faith of the risen Lord Jesus, we share in our own lives in the fruits of his passion, share the gift of peace and the assurance of being made right with God, the very gifts the risen Lord gave his disciples that Easter Day.

I said earlier on that the gift of peace and forgiveness was not only a gift for priests or the apostles. It couldn't be restricted in that way, since Thomas, one of the apostles was not present when Jesus came to be among his friends that Easter Day. 'We have seen the Lord', they told him, and he raised the questions that any reasonable sceptic might: 'unless I see the marks of the passion in his body, I will not believe', he told them. Unless I can see with my own eyes that the Jesus I knew, the Jesus I know to be crucified is risen, I will not believe. There is something profoundly physical and deeply intimate about Thomas' test of the resurrection: laying his own hands into the wounds of Jesus, touching the places that have broken and hurt the crucified body of Jesus in order to be assured that the peace and healing that the resurrection gifts was indeed real. And so, the week after, Jesus again enters the locked house and Thomas is there, to see and to receive for himself the gift of peace that Jesus proclaimed to the others. 'Reach out your hand and put it into my side', Jesus commands, 'do not doubt, but believe'. And Thomas sees and believes and testifies to the resurrection so that we, who have not seen and yet believe, may be blessed because of his witness. 'My Lord and my God', he affirms his faith in the power of the One who alone can give and restore life; who alone gifts peace that is beyond understanding.

Friends, this gospel reading is offered to us in our own times of doubt and fear as a gift of peace and affirmation, that even though life will not ever be without pain and hurt, anguish and worry, we already share in the fruits of the resurrection. In the same way in which Jesus' risen body carries the wounds of the passion, the signs of our salvation, so in our own daily lives we will carry the wounds of living, will carry the wounds that are the marks of the cost of our discipleship. This is how our patron St Paul put it: 'We always carry in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body' (2 Cor 4.10). We do so, so that 'the life of Jesus may be revealed in our mortal bodies'. 'Put your finger here and see my hands', Jesus tells us with Thomas. 'Reach out your hand in put it in my side'. Starved as we are at this time of touch and feeling, of any physical contact, these may be painful reminders of the cost of our isolation. But the gift of peace and new life that Jesus brings is shown forth in our bodies, and in the same way in which Jesus carries in his resurrection body the marks of the passion, so we carry in our own the marks of our followership.

The words spoken to Thomas are true for us today: reach out your hands to Jesus, place them in his wounds and side; believe, do not doubt. Reach out to the One who loves you, gifts you peace. Reach out to the One who shows you his wounds as the promise of the new life he grants all who believe. Reach out to the One who breathes his Spirit on you so that you may show forth the resurrection life to the world, by sharing God's gift of forgiveness with others.

In our locked rooms, Jesus still may enter. Through the power of his Spirit we are united as one body, sharing in our brokenness a sign of the wounds of his passion, sharing in our loving a sign of the gift of forgiveness, sharing in our unity a sign of the gift of his Spirit, and in our believing a sign of his peace. Friends, in this time of isolation may we be emboldened in our belief 'that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through him we may have life in his name'. Amen.