

LIFE IN LOCKDOWN

1 Pt 1:3-9 Jn 20:19-31

Our gospel passage for this Sunday after Easter is rather appropriate, isn't it? The disciples are in lockdown! There is danger lurking outside for them, just as there is for us at present. At least they could see their adversaries. But then again, they couldn't get rid of them by just washing their hands. The disciples are afraid, just as many are during these days. Are there lessons for us from their experience? I believe there are. And we find them in the words that Jesus speaks.

The first one is in the greeting of Jesus. He says it three times in that reading. 'Peace be with you' – 3 times. The peace the Lord gives is not about keeping us free of danger or distress; it's about giving us peace within the danger or distress.

I read about an art competition where artists had to depict the theme of 'Peace'. There were some lovely paintings of peaceful country scenes, lakes and sunsets. But the painting that won was of a raging sea with waves crashing against a high rock cliff. And on that rock face, in a tiny crevice a bird sat on its nest - safe, secure and at peace. In the words of hymn, 'The storm may roar around me, my heart may low be laid; but God is round about me, and can I be dismayed.' 'God is round about me'. The secret to peace is the presence of Jesus. If we know in our hearts that He is indeed with us, then we will know His peace. No matter what our outer circumstances may be, if we are certain that we are not alone, then we can know peace.

It's rather like a child who is scared of something – scared of the dark; scared of big dogs, or whatever. If that child has his father or mother with him, he can be at peace – even in the midst of the dark, or in the presence of a big dog.

Speaking of the dark, in Native American culture young men go through a process of initiation when they are approaching adulthood. Part of the initiation is what is called 'the vigil'. The father of the young man will take him in the evening to a remote place in the wild. There, as night falls, he will leave him to keep vigil on his own - through the hours of darkness and in the presence of the dangers of the wild.

When the light begins to dawn the young man looks around, he discovers his father sitting nearby.

He has been there with him throughout the hours of darkness and danger. We too have one with us, even though we cannot see Him.

The night before His crucifixion, Jesus says to His friends, 'Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you.' But notice what He said just before that. He has been talking about coming back to be with the disciples by His Holy Spirit. He has been speaking of the Helper, the Holy Spirit whom the Father would send to them. He says, 'The Father and I will come to you and make our home with you.' As we are reminded as Christmas time, He is Immanuel – God with us'.

In these days, we may not be able to meet in worship together, but fortunately the presence of Jesus is not limited to the church building. He has promised to be with us wherever we are. And He says to us as He said to His other friends, 'Peace be with you.'

I am reminded of the words of an old hymn:

'Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown? Jesus we know and He is on the throne.

'Peace, perfect peace, with sorrows surging round?

On Jesus' bosom nought but peace is found.

Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away?

In Jesus' keeping we are safe and they'.

Jesus assures us of the peace that comes from knowing He is present.

A second truth that comes through Jesus' words is when He says to Thomas, 'Look at my hands and my side'. In all there are three references in that passage to these scars of Jesus.

Why the emphasis on those marks of Jesus' crucifixion? Wouldn't it have been enough for the disciples to recognise Jesus from his facial features and his voice that they knew so well? And after all, the disciples had never seen Jesus in this condition, with those scars. So why the emphasis on his scars?

I think it's because those scars speak about His love – the infinite love of Jesus for his friends. He himself had said to them, 'Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends.' Maybe those wounds of Jesus are his way of saying, 'Things may be different now that I am no longer with you in bodily form. But what has not changed is my love for you. These marks of my crucifixion are to remind you that there is no limit to my love – not even if it meant that horrific death on a cross.' His love also comes to us as it did to them. In the immortal words of Paul, 'There is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from His love. Nothing in life or death, nothing in the present or the future.'

Those wounds of Christ's suffering speak also of how he remains familiar with our suffering. Isaiah spoke of 'a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.' And Jesus reminds his friends as He reminds us, that he continues to understand the very deepest pain and agony they may have to suffer. He is acquainted with it and feels it deeply with us.

In our Protestant tradition we display an empty cross in our churches to remind us that Jesus was raised from death and the cross was empty. In the Catholic tradition the practice is to display the body of Jesus, a vivid reminder of his death and suffering. I wonder if we have lost something by not having the body of Jesus there. That visible reminder of His great love that will stop at nothing. Maybe we should display both of them in our churches?

There is one last truth, and it too comes through words that Jesus speaks, 'As the Father sent me, so I am sending you'. Jesus' assurance of His love and presence with the disciples doesn't mean they can stay safely in their hiding place. They need to step out in faith and trust. And to encourage them He says, 'Receive the Holy Spirit' – My presence with you.

Jesus says to us too, 'As the Father sent me, so I am sending you'. He wants us to carry the message of his loving presence and His peace to others. Even in these days of lockdown we can do that – with those in our homes and also beyond that to others - through our phone calls and messages and acts of kindness. In these times of so much anxiety and turmoil people desperately need to see and know the peace and love of Jesus embodied in us.

Last week I recorded the service for Easter Sunday on Good Friday. There's a lesson there. In the midst of the Good Friday atmosphere in the world at present we need to be Easter Sunday people. Resurrection people in a Good Friday world.

In the darkness his agents of light.

In a world of anxiety, the embodiment of His peace.

In a world of isolation and loneliness bearers of His great love.