

**"PRAYING FOR PEACE"**

John 20: 19-31

Peace... It's something we all want isn't it? But even when we have it and feel it deep inside, it's hard to hold onto. Why? Because life happens, that's why. We think of the people of Ukraine as an extreme example of why peace is so hard to hold onto and feel deep inside. Many Ukrainians could have spoken of peace before they were attacked and invaded perhaps. Now? It's all turmoil inside and out. And what about our constant 24/7 news reminding us that climate change is now a climate crisis, that covid is not done with us yet, that depending on who you are and where you live, the colour of your skin, your sexuality, gender expression, your race or religion, peace is not something you'll find easy to grab hold of and feel deep inside.

And for many of us, there are other reasons still that peace is hard to find or hold onto. There are every day realities of trying to pay the bills, taking care of children, parents or other family or friends; there are work situations, stress at school and with friends, health concerns, you name it, there are hundreds of reasons why experiencing meaningful periods of life where the word peace means something substantial can be remote.

And yet, the gospel calls us to experience a deeper peace, the peace of Christ. The gospel calls us to pray for peace. How do we move toward a way of being where peace can be more real? Is there some spiritual practice that can help?

Enter our scripture reading. John's gospel is the last of the gospel accounts written. It is also the gospel most distinctive from the others. Each gospel has a purpose to fulfill in how it tells the story of Jesus. John's purpose is to go deeper into the spiritual. John is not just interested in telling the story. The other gospels do a stellar job doing that. John wants to turn the telling into a spiritual experience. John's gospel is intended to be meditated upon and prayed through. After reading John's gospel, if you don't experience the Spirit moving through you, you have not read it the way it's intended to be read. How so?

Let's look at our scripture reading this morning as a wonderful example. The risen Christ appears to his disciples. We're told that they are so overwhelmed by fear they go underground. They're hiding from the authorities. They're afraid what happened to Jesus may happen to them. We know that within months of Jesus crucifixion their fear is transformed into a remarkable courage to proclaim boldly that Jesus is alive, and his love is stronger than all the violent hate and selfish indifference that sought to erase it. They are so bold, in fact, and so at peace whatever happens, that they are not afraid any longer. What happened? Our scripture reading this morning is seeking to offer us an inside view of what happened.

And it all begins with an encounter, an encounter with the risen Christ. He comes to them and confronts them in their fear. Have you encountered Christ in your fear? Has his Spirit surrounded you and flowed through you in those moments when you don't know how you'll make it through?...

Jesus stands among, them, we're told, and he says this: "Peace be with you". In the original Greek, only two words are used to say the same thing: "*Eirenee eemeene*." And whatever more Jesus has to tell them, he repeats these words again: *Eirenee eemeene*... Peace be with you. But something else too. We're told that after Jesus speaks peace to the disciples, he "breathes" on them, and he tells them this: "Receive the Holy Spirit." Jesus' action is not just speech. It is breath, and in the breath, his Spirit passes into the disciples. Imagine that...

Well the earliest Christians reading this gospel account imagined that. Soon enough they were repeating these words of Jesus like a mantra, like a prayer. In early Christianity it began to be called "breath prayer." If the gospels and the New Testament tell us repeatedly that the life of a Christian is the life of prayer, how can we live in a way where all our living is prayer? It's all in the breath. What if every moment we are breathing becomes prayer?

Ok, preacher, what are you talking about? Well why don't we try it right here and right now. Before we ponder what else Jesus has to say to his disciples, why don't we, like the disciples of ancient times, pray Jesus prayer of peace. Please close your eyes... Pay attention to your breathing... relax... you are breathing in and breathing out... Now... as you breathe in, feel Jesus' words – peace... and as you breathe out, feel the words: be with you... peace, be with you...

Now imagine breathing in peace in the form of the Holy Spirit... and then breathing out peace into the world around you... the Holy Spirit comes into you every breath you take in and will go out of you as healing peace into the world every breath you exhale... peace, be with you...

OK, (you can open your eyes now) so all this is good... praying with every breath... regulating our breathing and relaxing as we take in the peace of Christ, his Holy Spirit and then breathing out the kind of peace that is healing love into the world... so where do we go from here?

Breathing in peace for ourselves and breathing out peace into the world can be a constant kind of prayer... if we practice it daily, even for a few minutes at a time, it can become something natural we don't even have to concentrate doing. We can use words at times to help focus us, words like *eirenee eimeene*, or we can just focus on peace in our breathing... But what's next?

First of all, after speaking words of peace, we're told Jesus shows his disciples his hands and his side. Anyone can have a few scratches and scars, and anyone can look something like Jesus. But to believe that the person standing right there in front of them is, indeed, Jesus, they have to see the kinds of scars from wounds that could only have been made after serious torture. There would have to be the kind of puncture wounds from nails and spear. So why is this important? What does it mean?

Peace cannot come from escaping Good Friday or pretending it never happened. Our world and our lives are full of peril for all the loving support, health and resources in our lives. Peace will only become real for us again and again as we live and breathe through life, working through our wounds and scars, our traumas and losses... The risen Christ reveals that healing and new life are always possible, even as healing is a work in progress. But step one on the healing journey into new life for the disciples is experiencing a deeper peace in their fear, a peace rooted in an encounter with One who was brutally killed but is alive again. New life can come again. Do you believe?...

Second, as Jesus repeats his words of peace he says this: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The disciples are given a mission. The experience of peace cannot be internalized for long if it is not shared. The disciples now become commissioned as apostles. "Apostle" means one who is sent. The disciples who were students and learners now become apostles who are sent out on a mission as ambassadors of peace.

To experience the peace of Christ is not just about working through the reality of Good Friday as it impinges on our lives. It is also, then to be sent on a mission of healing love and peace into the world. Where in your work place, school, neighbourhood, among family and friends, and other places beside do you need to sow seeds of healing love and peace as a missionary of the crucified and risen Christ? We are all called to be apostles who are sent.

Third, as we experience the risen Christ leading us through our Good Fridays into a new life, and as we take up our call to mission as apostles, we need strength, wisdom, inspiration and empowerment. We are only human, we need God not just above us, and not just beside us as risen Christ. We need God inside us. And so, Jesus breathes on his disciples and says this: "Receive the Holy Spirit." They will need a higher power, a higher strength, wisdom, inspiration and empowerment, in order to fulfill their mission and in order to transfigure Good Friday into new life, wounds and all. Do you breathe in the Holy Spirit? Unless you breathe in the Spirit how can you find the inspiration and strength to breathe out divine love and peace into the world?

Fourth, however, the work of healing love and peace in the world will be challenging. We will encounter hardship, discouragement, injustice. Jesus calls them to the work of justice with words that have often been misinterpreted: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are

forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." In other words, just as you and I must be ready to forgive, we must also be ready to call each other to account. Justice must never be sacrificed in the name of love. If we care about people and truly love them, we will work for justice on their behalf. Whatever the reason people are mistreated, be it the colour of their skin, their sexuality, their gender, their religion, their nationality... justice work is the work of an apostle of Jesus. But justice without love becomes vengeance and retaliation, and this is not the justice Jesus is calling us to fulfill. Thus, he puts these two together – forgiveness and justice, forgiving sins and retaining them. There will never be a situation where forgiveness is irrelevant. But there will never be a situation where justice is not called for either. The two must go together always.

Finally, it is a week later and one of the disciples – Thomas – has been absent the first time Jesus came. He has a hard time believing that his teacher and Lord, as powerful as he may be, could possibly come to life after such a torturous death. If we are involved in the mission of justice, of healing love and of peace, it is easy to be swallowed up by doubt and despair. Just think about what is happening in our world right now. Think about Ukraine. What can peace ever look like when the country is being destroyed, people are being slaughtered and displaced, and the rest of us around the world feel so helpless for all we're trying to contribute. Good Friday makes us all doubt and despair if we care and if we are invested in what's happening in our world.

And yet, what happens to Thomas? He encounters Jesus, and he knows it's Jesus because he sees the wounds and touches them. They are real. They are the kinds of wounds only nails and a spear could have made. And yet Jesus is alive. He is praying and breathing peace into Thomas like the rest of the disciples. And he is calling Thomas like the others to take up his mission as an apostle, with the power of the Holy Spirit, to go out into the world, to pursue the justice of God undergirded by love, and to build resilience through constant prayer - breathing in the Holy Spirit and breathing out peace into the world.

What about you and me? Today we have welcomed young communicants and a less young communicant into formal membership of this communion of faith, this part of the Body of Christ we call Armour Heights. We are the hands, feet and heart of the risen Lord, and his Spirit is our driving force. We are called to go out as apostles, to do the work of peace through justice undergirded by love. Are you ready and willing? How can any of us be ready even if we are willing? And yet, by the power of the Holy Spirit we take up our brokenness and inadequacy - our Good Friday existence, and embrace our Easter call as apostles of the risen Christ, as missionaries powered by the Holy Spirit, as ambassadors of the Prince of Peace...

Are you ready? Breathe in... Breathe out... and let's go. Amen.