

Peace be with you

A sermon given on the Second Sunday of Easter, 24th April 2022 – by the Vicar the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

John 20:19-end

"Peace be with you."

That seems to be the message the risen Lord wants to give to his disciples when they're gathered together in the upper room on that first Easter day.

"Peace be with you."

And it's not just a conventional greeting, because he says it three times. So I wonder, how is *"Peace be with you"* an Easter message? How does it speak of resurrection? The first time Jesus says it, we have just been told that the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews. So the risen Lord comes and speaks his message of peace first of all to those who are afraid; those who are trying to protect themselves behind locked doors; those who have raised all sorts of barricades to try and keep themselves safe. Jesus, of course, is the one who spent all of his ministry breaking down the barriers separating people and telling them not to be afraid. He is the one who touched lepers and sat and ate with sinners, breaking all the taboos of the time. He welcomed pagan foreigners, Roman centurions - members of the occupying forces, as well as mixing with respectable Pharisees. He treated women as equals and gave life to the dead. He crashed through every social and spiritual barrier. And of course, on Easter he breaks the ultimate boundary: that of death itself. And here he is on Easter Day, having broken the chains of death saying, *"Peace be with you."*

I think that speaks to a world that is still such a fearful place. I don't know what fears and anxieties you bring with you this morning. Some of us, no doubt, will have some very practical fears: how am I going to cope with increasing prices and the rising cost of living and a shortage of money; some of us may be feeling fearful in the face of the global situation, war in Ukraine and the fear of that spreading; an unpredictable Russia; or our inability to adjust quickly enough to the challenge of climate change. We may feel overwhelmed by the uncertainty of our world. Or we may be fearful of more specific things: an illness we can't control; the increasing frailty of old age and

the loss of independence that goes with that; a difficult relationship with a neighbour or a family member; we may be nursing a fear that we can't cope; that we'll go under; or that other people will judge us and find us wanting. But the good news of Easter is that the Resurrection opens up new possibilities - no longer is reality closed, fixed and unchangeable. The risen Lord brings openness, new life, new possibilities, renewal. He doesn't remove our barriers or pick the locks, he merely appears, standing before the disciples as he stands before you and me this morning, holding you in his gaze of infinite love and saying to you, *"Peace be with you."*

And then the second time he says these words to the disciples, he's just shown them his wounds. I don't know if you've noticed how in all the resurrection accounts there is this sense that the disciples do not at first recognise Jesus. Although he's real, although he's still very much Jesus in all his humanity, there is something strange about him, something mysterious. And then in the upper room, when he shows them his hands and his side, it's at that point that the penny seems to drop, and we're told the disciples rejoiced. That was the moment that they recognised him, when he shows them his scars; that's the point when he's presenting, if you like his credentials, it's his wounds which authenticate him. And that suggests it's the wounds of the risen Lord which speak to you and me in our woundedness. The risen Lord isn't healed of his wounds. Even seated at glory at the right hand of God, they remain part of who he is. His pain is carried into the Godhead itself and is there transfigured and becomes part of his beauty.

And this wounded Lord says to you and me, *"Peace be with you."*

I don't know what wounds you carry with you into the Minster this morning. Although as a pastor it is my privilege now and again to glimpse just a little of the pain and struggle that many here bear. And I know that many of us come here this morning weary and grief-stricken and battle-scarred, because life is difficult. Sometimes it's a struggle. All of us are to some extent walking-wounded. But in the risen Lord we meet not just a fellow victim, we meet one who also shows us our share of causing pain and grief to others. He looks at us with love and with infinite compassion and mercy. And he shows us his hands and his sides and he says, *"Peace be with you."*

And then the third time when Jesus speaks these words, it's when Thomas has joined them in the upper room. Thomas won't believe the testimony of the others. He has to see for himself. And I see Thomas as a kind of bridge figure: on the one hand,

he belongs with the Apostles; he knew Jesus in the flesh; he was one of the twelve; he lived through the events of Christ's passion and resurrection. So he's one of the biblical witnesses and he stands on that side of history. On the other hand, he wasn't present when Jesus appeared to the others for the first time and he struggled to take it on trust from them. So in that sense he's one of us. And he stands alongside you and me, being invited to put our trust in the risen Lord based only on the say-so of the Christian community. And in the transition from a faith based on touch and sight and hearing to a faith based on the testimony of others, it's not surprising if there are elements of doubt and questioning. Thomas is having to learn how to trust in a new way. And I find it striking that when Thomas is invited to touch the risen Lord's wounds, to put his hand in Jesus's side, there is no suggestion that he actually takes Jesus up on the offer. Instead, he simply cries out, "*My Lord and my God*" - a declaration of faith that goes far beyond what his five senses could ever have told him.

I don't know how difficult you find it to trust the risen Lord Jesus. Most of us have a lust for certainty - a need to be sure before we commit ourselves. But that can hold us back from forming deep human relationships, let alone with God. But learning to receive love means learning to trust and believe; learning to become more vulnerable, less self-sufficient; less confident in the power of our own knowing. But when we allow ourselves to become more vulnerable in that way, we become more human. And then it's easier to recognise the promise and invitation of Jesus as he holds your questioning mind in his faithful gaze and says, "*Peace be with you.*"

So here in this story we have locked doors; we have hurting wounds; we have unresolved doubts. These are some of the things the Easter message confronts. And the risen Lord comes to us this morning through our locked doors. He comes despite our wounds. He comes through our doubts and questions. And he says, "*Peace be with you.*"

And in saying that, he breathes his spirit upon us and sends us out to be his representatives, unlocking the doors that imprison others and setting them free; identifying with others in their wounds and bringing them peace. And as he speaks his peace into our lives, he makes it possible to believe and to help others to believe that we may cry, "*My Lord and my God*" even though we have not seen him with our own eyes.

So the risen Lord is still with us now, wherever his people meet; standing amongst us, meeting us in his written word and in broken bread and poured out wine.

And he says to each one of us, "*Peace be with you.*"

Passion Text

John 20.19-end

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.²¹ Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.²⁵ So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'²⁸ Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹ Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.