

PEACE, POWER AND PURPOSE

(John 20.19-23)

So, the events of Easter have passed, the man the disciples had pinned their hopes on has been killed by being nailed to a cross, and then was buried in a stranger's tomb. Where do they go from here?

I remember back in a previous life as the Middlesbrough FC Physio in the 90s sitting in on a team discussion amid the beginning of a low-level players rebellion against the then manager Lennie Lawrence, and he asked the players to make sure that whatever was going on they made sure they "backed the right horse" i.e. him - and not the usurpers trying to undermine him.

The disciples must have felt very much like they had "backed the wrong horse" don't you think?

What had happened to the spring revolution we hoped for? Now, as the gospels tell us, they were hiding away in fear with the doors locked; imagine a big, heavy, wooden door with an old, big, metal simple lock mechanism, no chance of opening that with your credit card or a penknife - they were taking no chances. They feared for their lives and what was going to happen next?

Then we have this incredible event; Jesus came and stood among them. We must have all been at an event where someone enters a room and the whole atmosphere and chemistry changes. Those old enough to remember (which will be probably 99% of us here!) will recall the song by The Searchers – *Every Time When You Walk In The Room?* It captures that feeling and emotion we all must know.

So, when Jesus appears amongst them – to use another saying "talk about making an entrance." The door didn't even open!

The first thing Jesus says to them is "Peace be with you" (which he is recorded as actually saying twice), they recognise him straight away and

he shows them his hands and side where he was pierced, but he seeks to calm their fears as he has made a bit of an entrance to say the least, and he will also be very aware of their fears in their current situation, and also how they must feel having abandoned him big time at the end.

I certainly know of times when I have not been everything I could have been to a friend or a colleague and remember the feeling of guilt and embarrassment I felt the next time I saw them again. Yet Jesus is saying "*Peace be with you*", I think in today's lexicon he might say, "*No worries.*"

Simply put, it doesn't matter anymore; yeah, it hasn't gone the way you thought it would, but this was the way God's plan was always going to be delivered. I am now here to give you instruction for the next part of the plan for God's purpose.

We can't easily ignore that Jesus was recognizable in bodily form to his disciples. He certainly however didn't need to open the locked door to stand amongst them and in the next section of John's Gospel, a week later, he appeared amongst them, again in a locked room to allow Thomas to put his fingers in his hands and side.

He had a physical form. Following this, sometime later he again is recorded as appearing to his disciples and eating a fish breakfast with them (in Glasgow you have a fish supper but in 1st century Tiberias you have a fish breakfast!) He ate breakfast and there is no record of the food falling out of him like happened to Casper the friendly Ghost!

So why make a special point about Jesus' new bodily form? Well firstly, because I have always found that the church and preachers tend to avoid this topic with a "don't worry it will all be alright" approach, but for me as I hope to die believing in Jesus I wouldn't mind reading and knowing a little bit more of what my future post resurrection could possibly be like.

But secondly, and more importantly, the clue to understanding it is in the first line of our Gospel reading; *on the evening of that day the first day of the week.*

This links to the Genesis creation story, the resurrection of Jesus in physical form is the start of God's re-creation of his original plan for the world and mankind, when the future bursts into the present.

Jesus is the new Adam who unlike the previous Adam will not fail, Jesus is the True Israelite.

First Century Jews would never have talked about going to heaven as many modern Christians do, they looked forward to the Age to Come which over the millennia has been slowly morphed into what we call Eternal Life. The Age to come is when God would put right all wrongs and restore man and the world to his original factory settings.

Paul echoes this in Romans 8 when he says:

*"For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the *freedom and glory of the children of God.*"*

As a learned Jew, Paul would have easily recognized the Old Testament parallels between the Genesis creation story and Jesus the new Adam, and similarly that the Passover story and delivery from slavery had been superseded by the crucifixion, resurrection and the Eucharist replacing the Passover meal.

Jesus then goes on to say to the disciples, *"As the father has sent me I am sending you"* then he breathed on them and said, *"receive the Holy Spirit."*

We are again seeing the remaking of the creation story where in Genesis 2.7 God breathed his own breath into human nostrils the breath of life and the world came alive with God's life.

Now Jesus is breathing life into his followers to offer new life to a broken world through the presence and power of his Spirit.

Unfortunately, we have made a bit of a mess of this by either being fearful and avoiding at all costs the Holy Spirit (or the Holy Ghost as we used say - which I found fascinating as a child in long drawn out church parade services with the scouts) the helper provided by Jesus.

Or we have used it as a hierarchical benchmark of our Christianity as we are so Spirit-filled having great experiences unlike our poor lesser Christian brothers who have not had the filling we had!

Jesus promised us his helper to take this mission of salvation and reconciliation to all the world because he knew even with his Spirit we would get things wrong but on our own without any help we would fall at the first hurdle.

Without his Spirit we would all probably be worshipping the modern version of Nero (as many around still do you might say), but thankfully Spirit-led men brought the gospel to our shores and here we are today worshipping the living God.

At times, the Holy Spirit can be unnerving and scary certainly awesome but comforting and encouraging, his purpose is build up and support the people of God and bring forth the fruit we will have read of, but certainly not always in away that fits with what we think or want to do.

Then we come to what to me is the most difficult part of the whole of the passage, *"If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."*

To his disciples, who as Jews would have believed that only God can forgive sins, this would be a very challenging issue.

As I understand it, and have read around it, Jesus is saying that now, filled with my Spirit, if you take my message and share it, then those who believe in me will have their sins forgiven but those who hear your message and reject it actually choose themselves not have their sins forgiven and they will be "retained" as some versions say.

Sin is serious and whether individual or corporate our message is to be heard and to point out (not in a judgemental way but in a clear way) that it will only lead to death and separation from God and his good plan for us and his world.

Sin, as discussed in John, is not about moral failings or the church as moral watchdog but primarily it is an inability or refusal to recognize God's revelation when confronted by it.

Our Ephesians reading takes us back to what had got Jesus very noticed in the temple when he overturned the tables etc. We need to remember he behaved like this not because they had opened a bookshop, but out of his anger and disappointment that Israel as the chosen people of God was meant to be a light to the Gentiles and lead them to God but they had set themselves apart from outsiders shutting the door to the rest of the world.

The act of male circumcision had become the ultimate badge of membership of an exclusive club. Paul now states clearly to Gentile Christians in Ephesus (and any Jewish converts) that circumcision no longer has any relevance as now both Jew and Gentile are reconciled into one through Christ's death and resurrection. Gentiles are no longer excluded.

The old rituals of the Torah or the Law and the old covenant do not belong to the new covenant launched by Jesus when he appeared to his disciples in that locked room after his resurrection.

We may sneer at the Jews for not understanding this but we need to work prayerfully to heal the divisions within our own church.

So, in summary, I've observed throughout my life that what we believe about the future very strongly influences how we live in the present.

If all we take from the Easter story is that Jesus died and came back to life so there must be life after death and if I say the right prayer and mean it then I know I will go to heaven when I die and all I need to do

until then is wait around and live a good life - then we have missed the main point!

Easter Sunday launched the revolution of God's kingdom on earth stated by Jesus in our Gospel reading today – Peace, Purpose and Power.

The future came into the present; “may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” became a vocation and command. What we do now in the present does matter and have value in the future.

The working conditions reforms of the Shaftsbury society or the abolitionists who fought slavery alongside Wilberforce were not just doing good works while they waited to go to heaven; they were every much a part of “*may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” just as today the work of Sowing Seeds or Christian Aid are about growing God's Kingdom in the here and now.