

John 20:19-31

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"

20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

21 Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

22 And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

23 If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

24 Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.

25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"

27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

30 Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.

31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Peace be with you

John 20:19-31

Verse 19 here is a bit like a picture of Britain in 2021. The disciples were together, in lockdown, in fear of the Jewish leaders, and Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you. Fear is a very controlling emotion, particularly when governments are needing people to do what they want. This has been true throughout history. It was George Orwell who pointed out that the propagandist often tries to find an enemy, real or imagined, to attack. This unites everybody against the 'enemy' and encourages them to stop thinking for themselves (and to avoid viewing the propagandist as the enemy). So after the death of Jesus, in John's account, only Mary has seen the risen Jesus, and this is the first time the others have seen him. They're scared - if they killed Jesus, surely they will be wanted men as well? *21 Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you!*

And so although the disciples are public enemy number one, Jesus brings focus to the situation. This was always how it was going to be, he was never going to lead a revolution, he always preached a message of love based on people turning away from their sin, and loving their neighbours and their enemies. That made him a wanted man. So rather than shutting themselves away he explains that the real mission of God has to begin with them.

Going back to the word Peace - this is the Hebrew word *Shalom* and it means so much more than “peace, man” the phrase of the sixties hippies, which has become associated with Jesus, but which in the end really meant very little. There was a guy in the 70s who turned up at all the festivals, with a beard and long hair and a kaftan, dressed like Jesus in the films, and everyone referred to him as Jesus, but it did a lot of damage to the way people thought of Jesus.

Shalom is a much more powerful thing. In the Old Testament context it meant ‘well being’ in the fullest sense of the word. Bruce Milne in his commentary says: ‘*[Shalom or Peace be with you] gathers up all the blessings of the kingdom of God; shalom is life at its best under the gracious hand of God*’. Jesus has achieved the possibility of reconciliation with God on the cross, and shalom is the result. Healing in mind and body. Many of Paul’s letters begin with ‘grace and peace/shalom to you’ and it’s not just a meaningless phrase. And - look at verse 22 - we are filled with His Spirit. What’s the first thing he does? *He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. and then immediately 23 If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”* We have that power given to us by Jesus, and it transforms lives. I watched a film called *The Mauritanian* this week, about Mohamedou Slahi who was in Guantanamo prison for 8 years, without charge, before a US court declared him innocent of 9/11 crimes.

He had been tortured. It was another 7 years before he actually got out. He pointed out that Arabic uses the same word for ‘forgiveness’ and for ‘free’. This is how even in Guantanamo he could be free, because he was able to forgive his torturers. This is the message of the kingdom of God, understood in this case by a Muslim.

We are free from sin and death. Prison is as much about your spiritual state as your physical incarceration. We’re imprisoned by our sin; our guilt and shame and bitterness and unforgiveness. And so although it was some time before Pentecost, this is the first instance of the giving of the gift of the Spirit. *He breathed on them and said “receive the Holy Spirit”*. Somewhat undermined nowadays by Christians who go round blowing on people and thus trivialising it. Jesus is imparting the very breath of God’s Spirit, in a deliberate echo of God breathing life into Adam in the account of the creation. And it’s for a specific purpose, that the disciples, and us too, are being given the task of continuing the mission of God, which would not be possible without the Power and authority and sheer life force we’re given by the Spirit. *“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”*

Of course the issue so often is that we’re not sure we’re up to it. Doubt, even about whether we believe any of it, is so often something we wrestle with. I think when I was much younger I didn’t see doubt as an issue, I was very sure of everything!

But of course doubt is a crucial part of faith, and I have to say I am now quite suspicious of Christians who are very certain about everything. It's not a sign of maturity in the faith!

And so Thomas is a great encouragement to anyone who's committed to follow Jesus, because it's Thomas who always asks the awkward questions which we wish we had the nerve to ask but don't, because we'll look stupid. Thomas who only believes in the resurrection if he touches the physical proof. He only appears three times in any significant way in John's gospel. The first time they're talking about Jesus leaving them (as he puts it), and Jesus says rather obliquely 'You know the way to the place where I'm going' and Thomas replies '*Lord we don't know where you're going, so how can we know the way?*' We might feel this is impertinent, but aren't we interested to know the answer? If Thomas had not asked it, we would not know. What was the answer? 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life'. John 14:6

The second Thomas question:

This is really quite a funny scene just after Lazarus has died, in John 11. Jesus decides to go to Lazarus' grave, which was a dangerous move because he had previously narrowly avoided being stoned in that area. Jesus knew Lazarus was sick, but he deliberately waited 2 days for him to die. *11 [Jesus said], "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I'm going there to wake him up." 12 His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." 13 Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.*

14 So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, 15 and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let's go to him." 16 Then Thomas (also called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let's all go, so that we can die with him."

This would be a gift to a scriptwriter because it's clearly said with heavy sarcasm! He thought Jesus was a bit mad, but nevertheless, he went anyway. Interestingly Jesus had no answer for this one. Maybe he was speechless.

On Jesus' second appearance Thomas is clearly a bit put out, not to say angry, because as it says in verse 24, he was not there the first time. So his questions are fuelled by resentment at being somehow otherwise engaged the previous week! But Jesus graciously lets him place his hand in the nail marks and Thomas's reaction is really heartfelt. He can't deny it, he has to give in and believe.

So I think we can be grateful to Thomas for his honesty. We dare not pretend when it comes to faith. It has to come from the heart, from a real love for Jesus. He will know anyway, if we're for real. And again you wonder whether we would have ever had Jesus's reply without Thomas being so upfront about his doubts. "*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*"

That, brothers and sisters, is you and me.

Grace and peace - shalom - be with you.

Amen.