



SO I SEND YOU

June 2, 2024

Good morning, it's a joy to be with you once again and to have a chance to preach from this pulpit not for the first time. I seem to come in cycles every seven or eight years or so, and that's just fine. I'm delighted to be back. Thank you for your welcome and your kind words.

The Scripture reading comes from John 20:19-23. It's a short but dense and vital passage.

¹⁹On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Judeans. Jesus came and stood in the middle of them. "Peace be with you," he said. ²⁰With these words, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the master. ²¹"Peace be with you," Jesus said to them again. "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." ²²With that, he breathed on them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he said. ²³"If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained."

How does God go to work in his world? I was faced with that question at a family lunch a few months ago when my grandson Leo, who was then just 7 years old, asked me eagerly, "Grandfather, if God does everything, why do we need to do anything?" His sister Annabelle, who was then aged 11, appeared oblivious. At the meal table she often has her nose in a book, eating past the book but concentrating on the text. I paused for a moment, but Leo pressed me again. "Grandfather," he said, "If God is responsible for everything, why does it matter what we do?" At this point, Annabelle took her nose out of the book and declared, "Ah, the illusion of free will and dove back in again." I was left to try to explain to Leo the mystery of how God works in the world. Try it sometime.

Perhaps I should have actually begun with John 20. It's all here. Actually, this is one of the great all time chapters, John 20. When I was working as a bishop, I often had to interview clergy for parish appointments. One of my regular questions to people applying for this or that was, "If you could take one chapter of the Bible to a desert island, what would it be?" And I would say, "To make it more interesting, you already have Romans 8, and John 20." It's what a lot of people would choose. Certainly I would. John 20 is all about new creation. Actually, John's Gospel as a whole is all about creation and new creation. Right at the beginning of the book, John echoes Genesis 1: "In the beginning." That's what he's talking about, and it goes all the way through God's love for his created world, which then gets focused on Jesus' love for his people, which then gets acted out in his crucifixion. That same creative love bursts out in chapter 20 into new Genesis, the new beginning, the new creation. This is where powerful divine love will take you, and we get to be part of that. This is how God works in the world: by doing new creation and sharing it with his people.

The first words of chapter 20, before the passage I just read, the very first words in the Greek are, “On the first day of the week.” John, like Shakespeare, does nothing by accident. The previous day, the seventh day, the Saturday, God incarnate rested in the tomb. And now the new week has begun on the first day of the week. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found that it was empty. The stone was rolled away, and we see through her tearful eyes that new creation has begun. Jesus in person, the risen Jesus, is both the start of new creation and the agent of new creation. He is the start because Jesus, his human body, is the first lump of this world’s clay to become immortal and central to God’s long-awaited new world. In today’s short but dense passage, Jesus calls his followers to be new creation people. The whole chapter resonates with Genesis 1 and 2. John is saying again and again in different illusive ways, this is what it’s all about. New creation.

In case we missed it, at the beginning of this passage, John says it again. John rarely repeats himself, and when he does, he’s really underlining it. “The evening of that day, the first day of the week ...” This is the beginning of new creation. And the first of the many new creational realities we discover here is that there are no locked doors in the Kingdom of God. They sealed the tomb, but they couldn’t keep Jesus in. They locked the doors, but they couldn’t keep Jesus out. Jesus comes where he wants to come, as he comes to us — not least when we try to seal him in a tomb marked, “Oh, that’s ancient history, it’s long been irrelevant.” Or when we lock the doors of our hearts, and say, “We’ve got enough trouble already; please don’t come and make matters worse.” Jesus comes and stands in the midst. It’s what he always does. As in John 1, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” He’s doing it again. It’s what he always does, as he does this morning, as we break bread and share wine in his name at his table.

People sometimes say of somebody who has died that they have gone home to be with God. But the biblical truth is that in Jesus, the living God has come to be at home among us, not as a temporary expedient for some other purpose, but this is what he always wanted to do, as the fulfillment of God’s age-old plan in creation and redemption. As the Old Testament says again and again, God’s desire was to flood all creation with his glory, as the waters cover the sea. I’ve often said to the students where I teach, “How do the waters cover the sea? The waters are the sea.” God wants to fill all creation with his love, his presence, his knowledge, his glory. The Word became flesh and dwelt, tabernacled, pitched his tent in our midst, and now Jesus, standing in the midst, says, “Peace be with you. Shalom.” This is about new creation. It’s the message they needed right then; it’s a message we kind of need right now.

Peace Through The Cross

This is the first of two great themes in this passage which are both unveiled through Jesus’ resurrection. The first is peace through the cross, and the second is power through the Spirit. Most of you know these things already. That’s why you’re here to worship on Sunday, Resurrection Day. If you don’t, then, please God, you will find them as you come and worship here. Peace through the cross, power through the Spirit. Those are of course preachers’ cliches. Any one of us — Jason or me or any of us — can knock off cliches like this till the cows come home, but every passing week and every passing year of our lives, we need to take those cliches out of the cupboard and bring them back to life. Peace through the cross, power through the Spirit.

Jesus had said it a few nights earlier in the upper room. “My peace I give to you not as the world gives.” The disciples didn’t know what he meant. But peace resonates at so many different levels. It begins here with their fear of the authorities coming after them as part of Jesus’ gang. Let’s go and round up his friends and his followers, do the same to them. But whatever the most immediate fear may be for them, or for us, “Peace be with you,” says Jesus as he stands in the midst. Earlier in chapter 14 of John’s gospel, Jesus had said, “Set your troubled hearts at rest,” like the psalmist saying, “Why are you so upset, oh, my innermost being? Why so disquieted within me? Put your trust in God. Set your troubled hearts at rest. Peace be with you.” Jesus knows we have, you have, I have, a thousand worries that are going to crowd in and destroy this peace, but when he comes through the locked doors of our hearts and our imaginations, this is the first first thing he has to say, “Peace be with you.” It’s often hard to hear. It’s often hard to believe, as Thomas found later on in the chapter. It’s often hard to act on it, as Peter found in the next chapter, John 21.

Jesus’ gift of peace, Shalom, is the new reality of the new creation. It’s about God’s world being put back as it should be at last. Because throughout Scripture, peace is what God the Creator wanted for his world. With that word “shalom” we glimpse Isaiah’s messianic vision of the new creation, with the wolf lying down with the lamb and the leopard with the kid and the lion eating straw like an ox. For many generations before Jesus’ day, faithful Judeans had been singing the psalms day by day, week by week: “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Peace be within your walls. For my family’s sake, I will pray that peace be with you.” They went on singing those psalms for 500 years after the Babylonian exile, until that prayer was answered in person, answered in God’s homecoming, God’s peace-bringing in the person of God’s Son.

The resurrected Jesus shows dramatically how peace has come about. He showed them his hands and his side. That’s a scary moment. These are the wounds of love. These are the signs that in fulfillment of the Scripture, he was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities, that the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all. That’s why there’s peace. Because it’s been done. It’s been finished. Those were Jesus’ last words. It’s all completed. The work is done. Like Genesis, he finished it on the sixth day and rested on the seventh day, and now he shows them his wounds, as a way of saying, “Peace be with you.” It’s been dealt with.

Wounds Identify Jesus

The wounds then do two things that identify Jesus. This really is the Jesus that they followed all along. He really is alive again. His body wasn’t left behind in the tomb or taken by body snatchers, but it’s been strangely translated into a new form of bodily existence — palpable, touchable, visible, though now possessed of strange new properties like coming and going through locked doors. Jesus now belongs equally on Earth and in heaven, because in him Heaven and Earth have become one.

Wounds Explain How Jesus Gives Peace

The wounds identify Jesus but they also explain how it is that he gives his people peace. Back in chapter 12, Jesus had spoken of his coming death in terms of his victory over the ruler of this world, the dark power that had kept the world enslaved — enslaved to sin and death, and hence to conflict and fear and hatred. That dark

power has been defeated. Now Jesus is the messenger who announces peace. Of course, it doesn't happen automatically like that. That's why Jesus is now breathing his Spirit upon his disciples, that they can take this good news out to all the places that need it.

We need to take this massively seriously for ourselves. Paul says that in everything we must present our needs before God, and then his peace will stand guard over our hearts and minds. Paul himself knew how difficult that was to do. Paul was no stoic. Our mental and emotional compasses, like Paul's, wobble this way and that. Day by day we need to reset them on the path of peace. It doesn't happen automatically; we have to take responsibility for saying, "Jesus, you promised your peace on the basis of what you did on the cross. Now, that's what we need."

There's an old hymn, I guess we probably all sang it growing up, or some of us did:

"Peace, perfect peace,
In this dark world of sin?
The blood of Jesus whispers peace within.

Peace, perfect peace,
Our future all unknown?
Jesus we know, and he is on the throne."

If, as you hear those words, you think, "We sang that in Sunday school, but we're grown up now, and we know it's not that easy." If that's what you think — and I'm tempted to think that — then we should hear Jesus' words in this passage as a call to grow up a bit further, to grow up past the appropriately cynical phase which rejects trivial solutions, to grow up as resurrection people — as cross and resurrection people, with the risen Jesus showing us the wounds of love, and saying, "Stop and think about what I just did for you. Breathe it in deeply, and peace be with you. Peace through the cross."

Then says John, "The disciples were glad when they saw the Lord." You bet they were. Not just because it really was him, not just because they were resonating with Psalm 122 again, the prayer for the peace of Jerusalem, which begins, "I was glad at the thought of going there," but because the truth was dawning on them that his resurrection meant that his cross had been the victory, not the defeat. In the generations before and after Jesus, there were thousands of young Judeans crucified by the Romans. And in each case, those horrible deaths meant defeat, the squashing of national and personal hope, the crushing of beautiful human life. But this one death, the death of Israel's Messiah, the death of the Word made flesh, this was God's victory: The Lamb of God, taking away the sin of the world. The resurrection proved it, because if death is overcome, it can only mean that sin has been dealt with. Peace through the cross. That's the first lesson of new creation in this passage.

We can't stop at peace in our personal lives, though we've got to be working on it there. God's world is once again ravaged by war, by hatred, by violence, by bombs and drones and tanks, by lust and greed, by lies and deceit. Our prayer throughout a time like this must be, "Come, Lord Jesus! Come through the locked doors of our

social and cultural and political imaginations. Come again, Word made flesh. Stand in our midst despite our fears and our attempts to keep you out. Stand in our midst, whether in Kyiv, in Gaza, in South Sudan, in Yemen, in thousands of places of fear and conflict, and right here in New York, and in my country. Stand in our midst and declare peace. Part of the answer to that prayer will come in the form of that second lesson from this short passage.

Power Through The Spirit

Peace through the cross is followed by power through the Spirit. “How does God work in the world?” My grandson’s question. Again and again, through his Spirit. The way God’s Spirit works is through those in whom the Spirit dwells. In John 7, a few chapters ago, Jesus invited everyone who was thirsty to come to him and drink. He declared that when somebody believed in him, rivers of living water would flow out from that person in fulfillment of Scripture. Which Scripture?

In Genesis 2 there are four rivers that flow out of the Garden of Eden to irrigate the world. In Ezekiel’s picture of new creation towards the end of the book of Ezekiel, the water of life flows out of the new temple to make even the Dead Sea fresh. John explains that Jesus was talking about the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit hadn’t yet been given because Jesus was not yet glorified. If God is going to come and take up residence in human lives, those lives need to be cleansed, need to be purged, need to be purified. That’s what happens on the cross when Jesus is glorified by being lifted up, as he said frequently. Once that’s done, then the Word can become flesh again and dwell not just in our midst but within us.

That is our vocation. That is how God works in the world. God is at work, and therefore, tremblingly, by the Spirit, we are at work. Avoid the false humility which says, “No, I don’t have anything to do with this. I’ll just stand by and watch while God does it.” No, God says, “Actually, this is how it’s done. I’m going to breathe my spirit into you, and you are going to take responsibility — prayerful, humble, wise responsibility — for doing what now has to be done. We are to be people of the water of life, new creation people, new creation in ourselves, and new creators — people from whose hearts flow rivers of living water to irrigate the world around in whatever sphere of work or life we are called.

Jesus commissions his followers to be truly human beings, reflecting God’s saving stewardship into his world. “As the Father sent me,” he said, “so I am sending you.” This is one of the most important missionary mandates in all Scripture. It is the vital link between the real Jesus who announced God’s Kingdom and went about doing it, and those of us who follow him. Otherwise, we would look at Jesus and say, “That was amazing, but we could never do that. We can never copy him or anything.” No. “As ... so ...” Now receive the Spirit — Jesus’ own spirit — so that we can be the “so” people corresponding to the “as” of what Jesus did.

Everything we learn about Jesus’ public career is now then to be translated into our multiple callings by the Spirit — feeding the hungry, healing the sick, celebrating God’s Kingdom with awe and sundry, caring for the poor, warning the rich and powerful, confronting the arrogant. Finally, think of Jesus arguing with Pontius Pilate

about kingdom and truth and power. We need, by the Spirit, followers of Jesus who will do exactly that today.

We can go back through the four gospels prayerfully and take incident after incident and say, “Lord, what would it mean that as you did that, so we are now called to do this?” We need wisdom to know how that’s going to play out. How can we possibly imagine such a thing? Isn’t it hopelessly arrogant? Back to my grandson’s question, “If this is what God wants to do, why do we have to do anything?” And the answer is, “Because of the Spirit.” In Genesis 2, God breathed into human nostrils the breath of life. Now, Jesus breathes on his followers and, anticipating Acts 2, commands them to receive the Holy Spirit. That which they are to do is that which God will do in and through them. Paul says somewhere, “I worked harder than everybody, but it was not I, it was the grace of God which was with me.” “Paul, were you working hard?” “You bet I was working hard, night and day.” “But was it actually you?” “No, it was God’s Spirit.” That’s part of the crazy, wonderful logic of being indwelt by God’s Spirit. The Word becomes flesh and dwells in us.

God, the homecoming God, the Word become flesh, will become flesh again and again, as children and women and men find God’s breath in their lungs and God’s rescuing purposes in their hearts. “As ... so ...” You could begin with this same passage: As Jesus comes in through the locked doors, so the church is to come in through the doors which the world tries to lock, to stand in the middle of the world’s mess and worry and misery, conflict and worse, so that the church can declare in deeds as well as words, “Peace be with you.” That is our ongoing pastoral and evangelistic mission. The church is called to be for the world what Jesus was for Israel, and the wounds of the church — wounds from conflict, martyrdom, schism, whatever difficulties — they are somehow part of the picture. As Paul saw only too well, the Spirit-driven mission didn’t mean coming down with all the answers from a great or arrogant height. It meant resonating with the groaning of all creation. As Jesus groaned when healing a deaf mute in Mark’s gospel, as Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend, as Jesus was grieved at the disciples’ hardness of heart, so the church must be prepared to groan and weep and grieve, which it will have ample opportunity to do, not simply because it will stand alongside and suffer alongside the poor and the sick and the helpless, but also because of its own internal wounds and weaknesses. That, paradoxically, has often been the moment when the church has been able to speak the word of peace.

This is the point. This is how the Word becomes flesh once more. The Word takes on your flesh, my flesh, not least when we ourselves are wounded or downcast. This is how the world beholds his glory, glory as of the Father’s true children. Blessed are the peacemakers, said Jesus, and the meek and the mourners and the hungry for justice people, because through them God’s Kingdom is coming. It will come into the dark places of the world. Western Christianity has been tempted to shrink our vocation to the private and the personal. Now the private and the personal matter, but that word “peace,” “shalom” echoes out through the world of nations and empires, of governments and protest marches, of elections and military coups, of invasions and battles. I have a sense that we in the Western churches, when we pray for peace, we’ve scarcely begun to think how those who follow Jesus might, in practical terms, speak peace into our world, our country, any country. The long years of secularism have dulled our theological imagination. We have retreated into the apparently safe

spaces of private spirituality, which is still important, but some of us at least may now be called to go, like Jesus, to the more dangerous places where peace needs to be made.

That, I think, is at least part of the meaning of the final sentence in this passage, which has often puzzled people. Jesus says, “If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained.” For a start, isn’t forgiving sins God’s job? Yes, it is. God, the Holy Spirit, is coming to indwell you so that you will be able genuinely to pass on God’s forgiveness.

I hear this saying now in a much larger sense. In Genesis 2, remember, there are two trees in the garden. There’s the Tree of Life, and there’s the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In John 20, at the end, we have what John says. This is how it works, that by believing, you will have life in his name. There’s the one tree. I think we have an echo here of the other tree. At last, the knowledge of good and evil can be given to God’s people, because since the cross and resurrection, they will not abuse it. Through the fresh gift of the Spirit, humans are able to understand the radical difference between good and evil and to speak truth about God’s way — the true way to be human into the world. It’s part of our mission: to open the eyes of the blind, but also to declare to the hardhearted, as Jesus did, that they are blind in a different sense, not least in Jesus’ warnings elsewhere about taking seriously the work of the Spirit and not assigning it to the devil.

I connect this verse particularly with John 16 where Jesus says that when the Spirit comes, the Spirit will convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment. That’s not a matter of us standing by and watching the Spirit do it. That’s a matter of Jesus’ people being equipped to speak truth to power. To call out, wherever it’s going on, the wickedness in public life. To expose and convict the places where people embrace fresh folly and wickedness. To assure the penitent of God’s forgiveness, but to assure the latter of God’s judgment, not as an arbitrary thing, but because God made humans to reflect him into his world. When people worship idols and serve them in self aggrandizement, God must hold them to account. God wants to do that through the Spirit, through the Church, my brothers and sisters, through you and me. The Church has to speak truth to power, difficult though that is, controversial though that is. As with everything in following Jesus, the fact that we will sometimes get it wrong is no excuse for not learning and doing it better. There is much we could say about this, but not here.

Stand back from these packed verses. See where we’ve got to. John is inviting us to see that with Jesus’ resurrection, new creation has been launched — new creation in which we ourselves are caught up. The new world has begun. A new act has been written for the new play, and we are all given parts to play — speaking parts, vital parts for the whole drama. We are called to be people in and through whom the Word becomes flesh and dwells in the midst of the world, full of grace and truth. We are called to come to surprising places with the always surprising message of peace. And as day by day we ourselves find peace through the cross, so we are called to be people of peace and to exercise God’s power through the Spirit. That rhythm of life — peace through the cross, power through the Spirit — that is our calling. I thank God for the many churches, of which this is one, where this calling is being lived out individually and corporately. I pray that we may all be given fresh grace to be people of peace and power in the days to come. We’re going to need it.

Let's pray.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the peace which you won on the cross. Thank you for the power which you give through your Spirit. Make us, we pray, to be people of peace and power wherever you call us. Amen.