

### Sermon Easter 3 Year B 2024

The gospel account placed before us today on this third Sunday of Easter is a good example of why we shouldn't pluck certain bible texts out of context, and expect them to make sense for us! The clue that what we hear today is part of a bigger story is indicated by the line: *While they were talking about this...* It begs the question, what exactly are 'they' talking about? The 'they' referred to are mentioned a few verses earlier: *the eleven and their companions*. They have been joined by the two disciples who have raced back to Jerusalem from Emmaus on Easter night, having seen the Lord, and had *been made known to them in the breaking of the bread*. It is this excited exchange of stories that they are *talking about* as our text opens today.

Into this scene of the gathered disciples and friends - undoubtedly excited and confused and trying to make sense of what is going on - that Our Lord appears and says, *Peace be with you*. In our reading from the gospel of John last week, this greeting of *Peace* was used three times by Our Lord to address his disciples. Today from Luke just once, though necessary, as we are told that the disciples are in fact *startled and terrified*. This is surely a natural reaction to seeing someone who just a couple of days before they had seen dead on the Cross, and his cold, grey body laid in a tomb. Now, on the one hand, this fear comes from confrontation with the strange and unknown, that which does not yet fit into customary categories. There is the initial response - that they were seeing a ghost - but as we will see, this is an unsatisfactory response. On the other hand, this fear may come from guilt. They are terrified because the one they had abandoned and betrayed and left for dead is back, maybe even for revenge. Again, an unsatisfactory response. And so, to disarm these initial responses Jesus speaks his word of peace: *Shalom*. 'Eirēnē' in the Greek, 'Pax', in the Latin.

Now, for the gospel writer Luke, this idea of *peace* has particular significance. You may remember that three times in the infancy narrative - the stories concerning the birth of Jesus - the message of peace is woven through. In the song of Zechariah (*the tender mercy of our God...[will] guide our feet into the way of peace*); in the angelic message to the shepherds (*Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favours*); and from the mouth of old Simeon at the Presentation in the Temple (*Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, because mine eyes have seen thy salvation*).

In other words, for the evangelist Luke, a key aspect of the mission and ministry of Jesus was to bring about peace, indeed a kingdom of peace. And this peace not a vague sense of harmony and concord between peoples. This word of peace is spoken over and against *other* claims of peace, namely the *Pax Romana* the so-called Peace of Rome.

When Luke is telling us about the birth of Jesus, he explicitly tells us that this occurs in the reign of Augustus. The first Roman emperor, he adopted the idea of peace as a key platform in his imperial policy. Through his reign, and in the decades after, the city of Rome itself was configured to communicate this idea. Temples, forums, and other public buildings were constructed and dedicated to *Pax*. All through the empire – including Judea – the idea of *Pax Romana* was propagated. It forms part of the backdrop, then, onto which Luke writes his gospel. But as he does so, Luke constructs a subversive counter-narrative. He says through his gospel, *Yes, there is a 'lord' who claims to have established a kingdom of peace. But let me tell you about another who brings true peace.* And so, at the end of his gospel, this idea is revisited. The idea of peace becomes bookends to the entire gospel. The evangelist effectively says to his readers, that in the resurrection what was promised at his birth is now fulfilled.

It reminds us of course of an important principle. The Christ we read in the gospels must be (as I have called it before) the 'whole Christ'. The gospels come from a unified vision. When we read one part, we must keep the rest of it in mind. In the example before us today, when we read of the birth of Jesus, we must do so in the light of his passion, death, and resurrection. In the gospel text today, as Jesus speaks his word of peace, he shows them his wounds. When we hear about the babe of Bethlehem, we must also see the One who is also crucified and glorified. It is an important corrective against some tendencies to accept only parts of Jesus' story and skip over the rest. But here we are reminded again to take seriously the whole Christ. His word of peace can only be received if we allow the whole Christ to speak it.

That we can only receive Christ's word of peace when we accept all of him comes to bear when we consider what is going on in the resurrection of Jesus. Very helpfully, the little story placed before us today gives us some important pointers. As I mentioned last week, it is a common error to imagine the resurrection of Jesus as merely the resuscitation of a corpse. The gospel themselves do not support this materialist reading. Instead, even a very cursory look at the resurrection stories reminds us that what we are dealing with is something new, unique, and unprecedented.

I also mentioned last week that the resurrected Jesus is continuous with his bodily life before, but is also radically changed. The gospel writers (including Luke) communicate this important truth in a number of ways. For Luke, eating together was an important dimension of Jesus' ministry and mission. Reference to meals and eating occurs in this gospel more than any of the others. You will remember that in the story of the Road to Emmaus, it is precisely when the risen Jesus *breaks bread* with the two disciples that they recognize him. In the text placed before us today, again, our Lord is seen to eat, in this case a piece of grilled fish. Here, Jesus' act of eating is *joined* with his offering of his hands and his feet for examination. And both – Jesus eating and offering his body for examination – says something about the resurrection, namely that this is a *real body* standing in the presence of the disciples. A body continuous, but changed.

By insisting on the real body of the resurrected Jesus the evangelist Luke is saying 'No' to those ideas about Christ that argue that he only 'seemed' to be human. The resurrected Jesus says emphatically, *Handle me and see, for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see I have*. This one statement ought completely disarm one of the classic heresies of the church, Docetism, from the Greek for 'illusion', or 'appeared'. This position has argued that Jesus' humanity was an illusion (a pretend humanity, if you like), but fails to accept the radical consequence of the divine Word of God truly taking human flesh. What's more, Luke is also critiquing those ideas of the resurrection that were really pagan notions (based on Greek philosophy) of the immortality of the soul. Christians believe *in the resurrection of the body*, not an escape into a 'spirit world'.

The questioning of the true humanity of Jesus, and his true humanity in his resurrection, has been propelled through the centuries to our own day and age. Some older members of this congregation may at times have been subjected to sermons in which it was argued that the resurrection of Jesus was really of his spirit, or that his body is 'spiritual body', or that he continues to live as a form of inspiration, or in the legacy of those who hold onto his teachings and example. Which may be true, in part. But as we should be aware, the classic heresies often tend to be half a truth. The risen Lord says, 'Look at my wounds', and 'Do you have anything to eat?' No one can follow this Christ and say that being his follower only means being concerned with souls, or our spiritual lives. Our bodies matter. They matter so much that God brings them into his eternity. The whole Christ speaks to the whole man. When we accept that unified vision, we will be closer to the peace Christ brings. Amen.