

Sunday Homily

2ND SUNDAY OF EASTER

19 APRIL 2020

YEAR A

"I send you."

John 20:21

Illustration

In Bleak House the author, Charles Dickens, has one of his characters, a Mr Chadband, say with great emphasis: "What is peace? Is it war? – No. Is it strife? – No. Is it lovely and gentle and beautiful and pleasant and serene, and joyful? – Oh yes!"

And what is it for us? We have uneasy peace when opponents watch each other over a gun barrel. We have peace because the children are not making a noise. We "need peace", we say, when perhaps all we need is a short sleep.

Gospel Teaching

But what did Christ give to his disciples when he said: "Shalom" – "Peace be with you"? Twice he said it and then breathed on them the Holy Spirit. An ordinary greeting suddenly became one of enormous significance.

The disciples were afraid. They had seen what the wrath and power of the high priest could do. The Master they so loved, who spoke with authority, who raised others from the dead and seemed himself so indestructible, was subjected to a mockery of justice and put to death with criminals. What hope for them if he could not defend himself? And so they gathered in fear, behind closed doors. Only when Jesus greeted them and showed the wounds he still bore did they allow the joy of recognition to surface. St John tells us little of what was happening in this room, except that the doors were shut. And that detail reinforces the reality of the resurrection. For here was Jesus, able to pass through the barrier of those doors and stand in their midst.

But Thomas was not there. One can imagine him in grief and disbelief, in doubt which could easily excuse him from commitment, refusing to take their words as truth. He would need proof of his own, he would need to see and to touch. He found acceptance at face value difficult – had he not asked how they could possibly find the "Way" Jesus had spoken about when he had not mapped it out for them? And the response then: "I am the way", Christ had said.

So now, with palpable love, Christ offers Thomas the proof he needs; offers him evidence of his wounds, the certainty of his physical presence.

Then, speaking into the future, Christ's words are to each one of us in our doubts and our questionings. We can almost hear the appeal in his voice, the longing to be real to all of us. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Another beatitude for his Church to take with it to the end of time.

And so he breathed on them. The same word is used as when God breathed life into Adam. Christ breathed life into his fledgling Church which now, certain in his resurrection, was ready to carry his peace into the world outside that room.

Application

But what of us who must believe without the physical contact, but who need his peace and the breath of his Spirit? Where can we touch him, see him, hear him?

We have that great leap of faith, which enables us to know that in the Eucharist, doubly hidden, is the risen Christ. Hopkins, the Jesuit poet, says in one of his poems. "And [I] fled with a fling of the heart to the heart of the Host" – the heart of Christ.

We touch Christ, too, whenever someone is hurt or in need. When we listen with patience, when we comfort a child, value the elderly, or infirm. When we take hold of each day of our lives and give him what we do. We are with him, too, in what we enjoy and love, in sights and sounds which give us pleasure, in both happiness and sorrow. The gift and the giver are one in Christ. Through such experiences, we receive Christ's peace, his comforting presence. This peace does not lull us into laziness, but gives us the confidence to share Christ's resurrection with others, as Thomas did.

Louis MacNeice has written a poem imagining St Thomas in India, where tradition says he carried the Gospel message. He speaks with envy of those he had converted, who believe without seeing, who have "a gift that was not mine". And yet it was Thomas', wasn't it? And the invitation of Christ called from him that prayer of utter faith: "My Lord and my God!"