

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Second Sunday of Easter Sunday 11th April 2021

It is amazing how quickly the power and the joy of the Resurrection runs into a thick sand that slows its progress right down. It is still the same day, the day of Resurrection, but in spite of this, in spite of the fact that the Lord is risen, and they know it, the disciples are in hiding behind locked doors. The doors are locked because they are frightened. The news that the Lord is risen has not been enough to overcome their fear. And so, although they have locked themselves safely away, the Lord must set off in search of them. He needs to find them in their fear, to enter the fear with them, and to draw out its power. In order to achieve this he says one thing, and he does one thing.

First of all Jesus says 'Peace be with you'; then he shows them his wounds; and that is enough, their fear is turned into joy. The Lord knows that the fear that is paralysing the disciples must be overcome if they are going to manage to achieve anything at all. You cannot preach the Gospel from a locked room; you cannot invite people into friendship with Christ from a locked room; you cannot found a radical new way of life, a radical new community, from a locked room. So he speaks peace into their hearts, he shows them his wounds, and he sends them out. Once the fear is gone, the mission can begin.

Fear is a very powerful disabling factor. We often use it to justify our own inaction or our own refusal to address the most important and challenging issues. And it is infectious, too, so if we are paralysed by fear the people around us learn to act in just the same way. They learn our fear, and it becomes their fear, and then they pass it on to someone else. The Risen Lord knows that this must be nipped in the bud immediately, and so almost the first thing he does is to act to dispel fear.

'Peace be with you'. We know that our words are seldom powerful enough to bring about a change in another person. We can say 'stay calm' as often as we like, but it seldom is enough to achieve what we want: the other person doesn't feel any calmer. What allows them to feel calm is the belief that all is well on some level, that they are safe, that the threat is not as powerful as it seemed. Jesus breathes peace into the disciples because they sense that with him present, whatever might go wrong it cannot end in defeat. He doesn't embrace them, we don't know whether or not he smiled at them, but we do know that he showed them his wounds, and this was enough. These wounds had been inflicted on him, but he was not defeated. Fear is a perfectly rational thing for them to feel, but he helps them to see their fears in proportion. His words and the sight of those familiar hands, hands which healed and which loved and which raised the dead, hands which are now wounded but still familiar and still powerful, are enough to break the chain of infection, so the fear will pass no further.

On the evening of that first Easter Day, fear is still king. It has infected the hearts of the disciples and hangs heavy over the room where they are gathered. None of us is ever at our

best when we are afraid. We don't make good decisions, we tend to be defensive, we are unable to share that vulnerability that is so much a part of authentic human living, we don't speak convincingly and we don't act tenderly. You might expect the wounds of Jesus, which he shows to the disciples, to make things worse, to increase the fear, but far from it they blow it all away. The wounds of the risen Lord are now wounds transformed, wounds completely changed. They are not signs of weakness and defeat, but signs of triumph, tinged and edged with glory. The fear that was hanging over the locked room just melts away into those wounds and is gone. The knowledge of the presence of the risen Lord is enough to disperse the fear. The disciples are anxious and fearful because they have lost the Lord, and his presence is enough to fill them with confidence and courage instead.

The liturgy of this Second Sunday of Easter invites us to take our place with the disciples in the locked room, in the room of anxiety and fear. It invites us to lay out our fears so that they can be overcome by the risen one, just as he did for the disciples. We are most fearful when we are alone, and our fears leap out at us when we forget that God is with us. So, here he is, entering the chamber of anxiety where we feel most out of sorts, most alienated from our best selves. We each struggle with our fears, and sometimes they can be hard to overcome because they dress up as something else. Our fear of confronting what lies inside us dresses up as constant noise; our fear of not being in control dresses up as busyness; our fear of being alone dresses up as sociability; our fear of illness dresses up as the pursuit of health and fitness; our fear of confrontation dresses up as being all things to all people. Only when we can see behind the façade and find those things that make us anxious can we invite the Lord to come and overcome them with us. When the disciples are in a storm-tossed boat they are terrified until the Lord is with them, then all is well. Today they are frightened once again, until those glorious wounds dispel doubt and anxiety. He invites us, today, to join him in that locked room; to know our fears and bring them into the light, where they lose their power, and to expose them to his presence. Whenever we are frightened or anxious we might remember this story, and tell it to ourselves once more. Just the telling brings the Lord into our chamber of fear, and he can begin to make us whole. Knowing that he is with us does not take away the fear, which is often deeply ingrained in our personalities, but it does stop it from disabling us, and stop it from infecting others. His 'Peace be with you' really can bring us peace.