

## Sermon preached at Gisborne, 19 April 2020

God of sacred texts, speak powerfully to us today through what is written in your holy scripture. Help us hear the witnesses to Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, and the promises of life in his name. Amen.

John 20: 19-31; 1 Peter 1:3-9

### *Are you in Peace?*

When you hear the word ‘peace,’ what comes to your mind first? Oxford learner’s dictionary defines ‘peace’ like this: ‘peace’ is a situation or a period of time in which there is no war or violence in a country or an area. For example, ‘The negotiators are trying to make **peace** between the warring factions; A UN force has been sent to keep the **peace** (= to prevent people from fighting).

‘Peace’ is a word that the risen Jesus speaks to his disciples for the first time after he comes back to them. Here is our question - ‘why peace,’ not other words? Besides, the risen Jesus also breathes the Spirit on the disciples, saying “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” That is, peace is the condition of all. So let’s find more about peace is about step by step.

#### 1. *Peace to you*<sup>1</sup>

In v 21, Jesus said, ‘Peace to you (*eirene whomin* - εἰρήνη ὑμῖν)’ to be exact, not ‘peace be with you.’ We may think that they have the same meaning, but there is a difference. In the first place, “Peace to you” is not an ordinary greeting especially in this context. Many translations have “Peace be to [or with] you,” implying the wish that peace be restored or granted. It, however, in this post-resurrection moment, Jesus’ words are not a wish but a statement of fact.<sup>2</sup>

For the reasons, we need to go back to the root word of peace in Hebrew - *Shalom* which means harmony, wholeness, and completeness.

The word *Shalom* (*shālôm*) in relation to God appears in Judge 6:23 when Gideon is frightened by seeing the angel of the Lord. The Lord says to him, “Peace to you; do not be afraid; you shall not die.” At that time, anyone who encountered God face to face was deemed to die.<sup>3</sup> Gideon responds by building an altar there, and calls it “The Lord is peace.”<sup>4</sup> ‘Peace [be] to you’ in Hebrew (שְׁלֹמֶיכֶם *shālôm* ‘alêkhem) is used as a standard greeting. And it is also used in more solemn moments. But why is it so important?

Shalom in the bible has a quite different meaning from the word ‘peace’ that we usually use in the present. Peace can be dictated by a ruler, but shalom is a mutual agreement between God and us. While peace can be negative - the absence of commotion, shalom is positive, the presence of serenity. So whenever we say ‘shalom to you,’ we technically say that the person is in peace with God.

Especially in John, the risen Jesus’ gift of peace is the fulfilment of the words spoken in the Last Discourse (16:25-33). Peace is his farewell as well as his gift to them. And his peace is different

<sup>1</sup> John 20:21

εἶπεν οὖν αὐτοῖς [ὁ Ἰησοῦς] πάλιν· εἰρήνη ὑμῖν· καθὼς ἀπέσταλκέν με ὁ πατήρ, καὶ γὰρ πέμπω ὑμᾶς.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. In "The Lord with you," a) in the instances when a verb is supplied the note of certainty is stronger than the subjunctive note of wish or possibility. B) when a verb is not found (as here), the phrase is practically always a declaration and thus, one should not use the subjunctive "be."

<sup>3</sup> Genesis: 16:13; 32:30 - Genesis 32:30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”; Judges 13:22

<sup>4</sup> Judges 6:24 וַיִּבֶן שָׁלֹמֶיכֶם לַיהוָה וַיִּקְרָא-לּוֹ יְהוָה שְׁלֹמֶיכֶם וַיִּתֵּן שְׁלֹמֶיכֶם דַּ תְּלֹמֶיכֶם הַזֶּה עֹלָמָה בְּעַפְרַת אֶצֶי הַעֲזָרָה: פ

from what the world gives. So they don't have to make their hearts troubled or fearful. When the disciples were fearful at the Last Supper, Jesus assured them that his parting gift of peace would not be short-lived. He also related this peace to the promise that he was coming back to them. Now that he has come back to them, he grants this peace, for in the Holy Spirit (v. 22) they have an enduring presence of Jesus, and the gift of becoming the children of God that is the basis of Christian peace.

## 2. *Peace and the Holy Spirit*

Being in the peace of Christ Jesus is also the condition of the receiving the Holy Spirit. The giving of the spirit is already prophesied in John 17, which has an important meaning. Before Jesus says, "Receive the Holy Spirit," he breathes on his disciples. The Greek verb *emphysao* (ἐμφυσᾶω), 'to breathe,' reminds us of Genesis 2:7 - the creation scene, where we are told: "The Lord God formed man out of the dust of the earth and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life."

Just as in the first creation God breathed a living spirit into man, John seems to tell us that now is the moment of the new creation as Jesus breathes his own Holy Spirit into the disciples, giving them eternal life. But receiving the Holy Spirit is not just a static event. It is also accompanied by dynamic actions, namely 'forgiveness/retains of sins of any.'

## 3. *Peace and Forgiveness of sins*

The power of forgiveness of sins means that when we forgive people's sins, at that moment, God forgives those sins and they remain forgiven. It may make us feel uneasy. The first thought that comes to mind may be like this – do we really have the power to forgive? Or how do we know their sins are forgiven? Or what if we forgive people by mistake? And so on. Many what-ifs can be followed. Forgiveness of sins is such a big thing for all of us. Yet all these questions are based on our common knowledge about what sin is. In scripture, sin or sins are primarily about the disrupted relationship between God and us. An act of forgiveness of sins restores this relationship again between God and us, or God and those who are forgiven. Jesus forgives those who crucified him even he was on the cross.<sup>5</sup> Imprisoned Peter was able to sleep even though he was about to be executed.<sup>6</sup> Paul found the secret of abundant life in the Holy Spirit,<sup>7</sup> as he knew how to live in God's peace guided by the Holy Spirit.

In '*The Great Divorce*,' by C. S. Lewis, we hear the summary of the story about Heaven and Hell, and residents there respectively. The question was that where we find peace in this story. By this time, you may have noticed that 'peace' is not such a simple thing. Also forgiveness of sins doesn't happen in one-way, but through mutual actions. In *the Great Divorce*, sins have different faces. It can be someone's pride, or greed, or hatred or obsession. Strangely these are from the inside of people, not from the outside. The life stories of those individual ghosts have are familiar to us because they are part of life. In the end, the ghosts who have been offended by the offers from Heaven's side decided to go back to earth, namely Hell by choice. What measures had to be used to persuade them to stay in Heaven, do you think? And where was peace in the story of *the Great Divorce*?

Living in the peace of Christ is crucial in our faith journey. The serene, complete wholeness may be a lifelong wish for everyone in the name of happiness and success. We who are in Christ have such peace in us earned by grace that no one will take from us. Or are you in peace indeed?

<sup>5</sup> Luke Luke 23:34 -Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 12:6 Peter Delivered from Prison - The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison.

<sup>7</sup> Philippians 4:12 I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances, I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.