

The Holy Spirit

[Rev 21-22, Acts 16:9-15, John 14:23-29]

Sermon preached by Bishop Tom Frame, 16 May 2004.

As the 50-day season of Easter comes to an end, the lectionary readings direct our attention to the work of the Holy Spirit. Why is that? Because there is an attempt to parallel the experience of the disciples with the devotional life of the Church. After the resurrection, the disciples encountered the Risen Jesus. They walked and talked with him. He comforted and encouraged them. He challenged and commissioned them. As this was happening, they were reminded of words he had earlier spoken about the Spirit. Described in various ways as 'Teacher', 'Comforter' and 'Helper', the Spirit would enter the lives, souls and being of the disciples – Jesus would still be with them in a real way – after he had ascended into heaven. And it was the same Spirit who would continue to direct the proclamation of the Gospel and empower the Church to bring nearer of the Kingdom of God inaugurated in Jesus' life and death. So the readings disclose the shift from the presence of the resurrected Jesus to the consequences of an ascending Christ. This naturally produced some alarm and anxiety in the disciples. They do not want him to leave – they love him. They do not want him to go – they need him. But depart he must ... for reasons he has already explained. So what does he do ... and what does he give them ... as they face a very different future? Peace. Amidst all the uncertainty and turmoil, he says (in verse John 14:27): 'Peace I leave with you – my peace I give to you – not as the world gives – do I give to you'. This is a great promise and pledge ... it is generous and sublime.

But as we gather this morning, many of us do not have peace – neither peace within us nor peace around us. Jesus might have uttered these words and offered this gift to the disciples ... but these words do not seem to have penetrated into our experience (or have they?) ... nor has his gift practically affected our reality (or has it?). I want to explore with you this morning what these words mean of Jesus and what this gift from Jesus conveys – not just for the disciples long ago but also for us today.

Our Gospel reading (John 14: 23-29) is a report of the events following the Last Supper on the night before Jesus was executed. The Master prays for the disciples and prepares them not only for the next day and its terrors, but for all they will encounter during the remainder of their lives. Following his death and resurrection, Jesus appeared among them. What were his first words? 'Peace be with you'. He said these very words again as he later commissioned them for service in his name: 'Peace be with you, as the Father has sent me, I also send you'. They heeded these words and became witnesses to Jesus and his resurrection across the known world. And what was their experience and their fate as his ambassadors? The Church's tradition is that all of the disciples (excluding St John) were tortured for their beliefs and condemned to suffer violent deaths. The liturgical colour for Saints' days is red (except for St John's Day) because they are remembered as martyrs and the colour of the day commemorates the shedding of their blood. This was not the end of the era of martyrdom. Christians in subsequent decades and centuries were neither individually nor collectively spared the ravages of violent crime, civil strife or brutal warfare.

And if we look back on our own lives, many of us have known first hand what it means to face intimidation, fear and cruelty. There is often strife within families, hostility between communities and conflict waged across national boundaries. It would seem that we are no closer to overcoming violence in our own neighbourhoods than we are to eradicating warfare from the face of the Earth. So if peace is the absence of these things, Jesus has not been true to his word and his gift is a mere token.

However, working on the basis that Jesus is true to his word and that his gifts are real, peace must apparently be more than the absence of war ... and the peace of which Jesus speaks ... and which he imparts to his followers ... must be about something else ... and have very different consequences. We begin to get a sense of this from Jesus himself ... when he says that the peace he gives is 'not as the world gives' ... and when St Paul describes it as the 'peace that passes all understanding'.

In the New Testament, the Greek word translated peace has all the content and intention of the Old Testament Hebrew word 'Shalom'. It means completeness, soundness and wellbeing; it encompasses personal and corporate flourishing, health and prosperity, and is always grounded in harmony and

concord. Individual shalom is inseparable from the corporate shalom of fellowship. It is the normal and proper condition for individuals and societies, and is enjoyed most intimately in the family circle. Shalom originates with God and is imparted as a gift. It is linked to justice, faithfulness and truth depicted in the vision of the whole creation revealed in texts like Psalm 85:10-13. In fact, the entire cosmos is involved in the covenant of divine peace. The destruction or absence of shalom is expressed in laments over war and violence (found in 1 Chronicles 22:7-10, Psalm 46:8-11, Psalm 120 and the Lamentations) and in condemnations of unrestrained and vengeful military campaigns (Deuteronomy 20:10-20 and Amos 1).

When we properly understand the concept of 'shalom', we begin to get closer to what Jesus meant when he spoke of 'peace': completeness, soundness and wellbeing. We are *complete* when we recognise that our identity is not dependent upon conforming to the standards, fashions and expectations of this world, and that our purpose in life is not achieved by acquiring wealth, position or power. We find our identity as children of God, we express our identity in families, and we achieve our destiny in being united to God and his people – the Church. We are *sound* when we know truth and commit ourselves to living that truth. The wisdom and insight that comes from God's truth makes those who know and live it integrated people – able to show mercy, ready to offer forgiveness and willing to uphold righteousness. Such people are clear in their convictions and consistent in applying them. And we have *well-being* from the security that flows from a belief that we have received much from God – blessings of a material, intellectual and religious kind – that ensure the health of our bodies, minds and spirits. We have compassion to pray for those in need and grace to share from our abundance. Completeness, soundness and wellbeing when taken together are getting very close to what Jesus was conveying in the gift of peace.

Yet, the peace offered and the peace experienced is nonetheless something less than that which is to come. It is a foretaste of something all-encompassing and eternal. This is not to deny the experience of this life but to prompt us to think again about our doctrine of the future and the promise of heaven. The writer of the Ecclesiastes (3:11) says that God sets eternity in the human mind. Here, in this life ... on this world, we are trapped in time and space. We are imprisoned by the immediate and the finite – but part of us soars into the realms of the transcendent and the infinite – into the heart and the action of God.

When we ponder – when we are immersed – in the eternal and infinite – we begin to perceive and start to grasp the majesty of Christ and the magnitude of the coming Kingdom. John's glimpse of the future and of heaven is described in our first reading from the Book of Revelations. We are presented with a vision of the New Jerusalem – of the created order restored to its perfection – as a promise of what the future holds. In the midst of this vision is Jesus whose radiance provides the light of heaven. He is enthroned and receives the praise of every living thing. In this cosmic context where space and time do not intrude or restrain, we can begin to see the trials and tribulations, the shortcomings and setbacks of this world according to their true character and their proper perspective. In the Revelations, John gives us a bigger and broader picture of where this world is headed and our share in its destiny. As we have a glimpse of the future ... we will find our longings are not too strong – but too weak ... we realise that we are prepared to accept much less than we are offered ... we concede that we are troubled by minor, peripheral and transitory things and in so doing possibly deny ourselves completeness, soundness and wellbeing – in a word 'peace'.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to open us to the eternal and the infinite ... to help us take hold of those things that certainly bring peace and relinquish those things that only produce anguish. During the week (Thursday) we remember the ascension of Jesus ... and his promise to return ... before celebrating the Feast of Pentecost – the coming of the Holy Spirit – in two weeks time. There is much yet to come in human history and the Christian Church looks forward in anticipation to its drawing near – including a peace within and around that nothing can shatter. Let me close with a poem written on the noticeboard of an English retreat house:

*Look back, remember, and have confidence;
The future, like the past, has God in it;
His cupped hands bear the whole of time, and you;
The future holds nothing which can elude,
His promised care and mastery. Amen.*