Easter 2 - John 20:19-end

My uncle was in the RAF. He joined as soon as he could, which was during the Second World War, and rose to the rank of Squadron Leader, though not early enough to be involved in any fighting. He was, however, very much involved in building the peace. He would talk about it often, clearly very proud of the role that British service personnel had played, not only in winning the war but in helping Europe to recover after years of mass devastation. Stationed out in Germany for many years, he along with hundreds of others not only helped rebuild the infrastructure of a nation, many of whose cities had been bombed to smithereens in the final year of the war, but also helped restore relationships between people across the continent who had, until recently, seen one another as sworn enemies.

Peace is costly and isn’t just about winning wars. It’s as much about what happens after the wars are won and agreements are signed. We only have to look across the waters to Northern Ireland to see how neighbours and communities, as well as political parties (and churches, indeed) still have to work together in a sustained and committed way, day by day, if the hard won peace is to be embedded and be lasting.

Our gospel reading today invites us to reflect on these things in relation to our own lives. Here we have Jesus’s closest friends gathered behind locked doors in fear. It’s Easter Day and that very morning at least three of them (probably many more by then) had seen the empty tomb and one of them, Mary Magdalene, had actually met and spoken with the risen Jesus. The victory’s been won. Jesus is alive, having triumphed over sin and death. The very grave has been proved unable to contain this risen, conquering Son. And yet here they are, frightened, hiding away, unable to grasp the enormity of what’s happened and what that means.

It’s into this fear and confusion that Jesus comes and stands among them and says, ‘Peace be with you’. This isn’t merely a friendly greeting. It’s not the kind of ‘hello, how are you?’ that has become commonplace in our sharing of the peace at many a communion service. This is Jesus offering them the gift of a renewed and restored relationship. Despite the fact that they’d abandoned him and betrayed his friendship when he needed it most, despite the fact that they’re now so consumed with fear for their own lives that they can’t begin to celebrate his resurrection, Jesus comes to them. He stands among those who’ve so badly let him down and says, ‘Peace be with you’ and he shows them his scarred hands and wounded side, not in condemnation, but in love. It’s as if he’s saying ‘despite what you did, it’s ok, I still love you, all is well’.

There’s a famous saying of Mother Theresa: ‘Peace begins with a smile’. I imagine Jesus smiling as he stands there and looks around at each of his friends. They’re reassured. They accept his gift of peace and restoration and can, at last, rejoice.

But that’s not the end. Jesus has work for them to do, even though they’ve shown themselves to be pretty weak and feeble. He reassures them again - another ‘Peace be with you’ - before sending them out to continue the work he came to do. ‘As the father has sent me, so I send you.’ When we consider what the father sent Jesus to do, that’s quite an extraordinary commission. But it’s what he invites all of us to do: to go and be agents of transformation and reconciliation, just as he was. We don’t do it on our own, or in our own strength. We do it having accepted his gift of peace - that is, from a renewed and restored relationship with him - and we do it having received the gift of the Holy Spirit to equip us and strengthen us for all that he asks us to do.

We live in a world that’s broken and divided; a world desperately in need of the peace that Christ come to bring. And whilst we can feel overwhelmed when we look at the global crises we face - and there are far more crises out there than the current pandemic - there are, nonetheless, plenty of places where peace needs to be sown closer to home; within ourselves, in our relationships, in our communities and, dare I say, even within our churches.

What we see in our gospel reading today is Jesus taking the initiative, as he always does. Jesus coming alongside those who had hurt him and let him down. Jesus reaching out in love with the scars of his suffering still visible. Jesus offering the gift of peace that says ‘it’s ok, I still love you, all is well’. And Jesus saying to us as he did to them, ‘as the father has sent me, so I send you’. What does that mean? Well, amongst other things, it means

coming alongside those who’ve hurt us and let us down and offer peace;

reaching out in love across the divides and injustices so apparent in our communities and help bring the healing and peace that we ourselves have received from the our risen Lord;

making a point of living out that peace within our church families, particularly with those who irritate and annoy us, those we find difficult and those we simply don’t much like.

Peace begins with a smile. It sounds easy, but it can be oh so hard.

If you’re anything like me, your feelings are rather mixed in these strange days through which we’re living. On one level, we’re constrained and limited, unable to do so much of what we took for granted only weeks ago. On another level, possibilities and choices are still there for us to take and make the most of.

We could do worse in the coming week than to use the time we have to reflect on this gospel story.

How readily have we accepted the free gift of Christ’s peace in our own hearts that assures us of a renewed and restored relationship with him; whoever we are whatever we’ve done, or failed to do?

Who are the people who’ve hurt or abandoned us? and how ready are we to take the initiative and reach out to them in love with our own scarred hands and wounded side, and say ‘Peace be with you’ even when that may be rejected?

Where are the injustices in our churches and our communities and how willing are we to accept Jesus’s invitation to be his agents of transformation and reconciliation, even though that may result in us being hurt and wounded, as was Jesus?

As we continue to navigate our way in unfamiliar territory, may we know within ourselves and show forth in our lives the peace Christ freely offers.