

Sermon by Rev David Thiem

Easter 3 – St Aidan’s & Wesley 10.30am – 19th April 2015

Theme: “The presence of the risen Christ to the gathered disciples.”

Reading: Luke 24:36-48

Text: “Jesus stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.”

Luke 24: 36b-37

Introduction

In today’s Gospel from Luke we have the disciples reacting to Jesus’ sudden appearance among them, with fear, disbelief and then wonder. This ‘visitation’ has a two-fold agenda:

- to enlighten the disciples about the risen Christ
- to commission them for the preaching of the gospel

In a sense, this reading is a summary of the Easter events, and proclaims Christ’s passion and resurrection. Also, there is the anticipation of Pentecost in the commission of the gospel to all nations. Thus Christ’s resurrected body is the object of the church’s faith, not simply as a miracle wrought by God, but as the centrepiece of the proclamation of the new life in Christ.

In this final chapter, Luke recounts six discrete episodes to provide assurance of Jesus’ resurrection, of his prophetic credibility and of his continuing will to bless his followers present and future. These six sections are:

1. The women at the empty tomb (vss 1-8)
2. The women share with the disciples their experience at the tomb (vss 9-11)
3. Peter checks out the story of the women and finds the tomb empty (vs 12)
4. On the road to Emmaus two of the wider discipleship group encounter Jesus (vss 13-32)
5. The gathering of the disciples in Jerusalem and Jesus coming among them (vss 33-49)
6. Jesus goes with the disciples to Bethany, where he ascends into heaven (vss 50-53)

Our pericope for today’s reading is this second to last stanza, minus a few verses. We have the eleven disciples gathered, but with them is also a wider group of followers and it is into this group that Jesus comes. Often we think of it purely as the inner circle of disciples, but this is not the case. So let us take a few minutes to examine this section of Scripture.

Luke 24:36b-28

The gathered disciples are hearing the testimony of the two disciples who had met Jesus on the Emmaus road and are talking about this when suddenly there is Jesus standing in their midst. It is here that our story for today begins. We can divide this section into four acts to see how Luke moves us forward towards the ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

These four parts push the reader to accepting that Jesus has risen, is not a ghost and the disciples are called to be witnesses to this fact. The four parts are:

1. The greeting and looking at Jesus' body (vv. 36b-40)
2. Jesus asks for food – a sure sign he is not a ghost! (vv.41-43)
3. The teaching - 'he opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures (vv.44-47) This showed that Jesus' death and resurrection were to be seen as part of his lordship.
4. The call to the disciples that they were witnesses to all that had happened and that they would be sent 'what my Father has promised' – the gift of the Holy Spirit will be the final proof and will help them in their witnessing.

Jesus begins by greeting the disciples with "Peace be with you."

This 'shalom' is given new significance as the resurrected Jesus greets the disciples. For them there is fear and bewilderment at the presence of Jesus but this greeting of peace is foundational to their relationship as it symbolises wanting the best for each other in the sight of God. Hence here is the beginnings of a new relationship which acknowledges God's sacrificial love and care for all people. Hence today we still greet each other with the 'peace of the Lord'

Jesus recognises the fear within the discipleship group and offers them proof that it is in fact 'he' by showing his hands and his feet bearing the signs of the crucifixion. This combined with the fact that he asks for food is to prove he has arisen in bodily form and is not a ghost. Also the request for fish brings back the memories of shared meals not only with the disciples but also with the crowds being fed.

We need to remember the 'flow' of Luke's Gospel and that it is written that people may believe.

At the outset of Luke in the first chapter verses 3/4 he writes:

"Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." Luke systematically dispels the fears and bewilderment of the disciples bringing them to accept Jesus' peace and the fact of his resurrection. This leads in to an openness to hear Jesus' teaching and for them to become witnesses beyond Jerusalem and Galilee paving the way for the Holy Spirit and testimony to the nations of the world.

What can we gain from this passage for us today?

One question that I read as I prepared today's sermon struck me as incredibly poignant. That question was:

"What in our communities needs the presence of the risen Christ?"

Jesus began today's passage with the greeting of "peace".

Peace is a multi-faceted concept but aspects of peace, personal/corporate and worldly are in this passage. Jesus talks to his disciples about repentance and forgiveness before they can be witnesses to the world. Just maybe this is the basic premise to work from in the new community of the church which is formed through the grace of God in Christ.

Part of our personal and corporate Christian life needs to examine afresh forgiveness and justice, what it means to be reconciled to those with whom we struggle even in the

life of the church and how we project our image to the secular community in which we live.

As I look at the community I see a huge need for the 'Peace of the Lord' to be present. But where is that to be found? It should be found in us, the witnesses called upon by the risen Christ to proclaim God at work. Jesus commissions us to declare the presence and the power of God even in the midst of tragedy, despair and death. They are not ultimate – God is. And God aims to redeem creation and us. As people of faith, we are to be witnesses to Christ's presence among us, in our words and in our deeds; our faith demands nothing less.

Currently we are being overwhelmed by Gallipoli accounts of heroism as we approach the centenary of that battle in World War 1. For me, the sad thing is that no-one is talking about 'peace' but rather a glorification of war and at Gallipoli there was an appalling loss of life, that while mentioned, is being overshadowed by the rise of nationalism. Remembering is good provided that we learn from the past and seek not to replicate those same disasters.

Today as Christians, we are called afresh to share 'the peace of Christ' in a world that desperately needs it.

Let us pray

Lord Jesus we confess that our congregation, as much as we love it, as hard as we work, is not the church as church ought to be. We have divisions among us – factions. Sometimes we snipe, fuss and fight. We are too often inwardly focussed and too timid to use the resources that you have given us for ministry in the world. And yet, Lord Jesus, in spite of all that, you come to us, you surprise us – even us – often when we least expect you to be with us. Not content to remain a vague, spiritual idea to us, you occupy space among us, touch us, and speak to us thereby we know the reality of your resurrection. Continue to surprise us with your unexpected presence among us and bring us your peace, we pray. Amen.