

A Community of Peace

Third Sunday of Easter (C)

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In our Journey through Holy Week, we walked with Jesus on his journey from Palm Sunday to the Cross on Good Friday. As we make the Easter Journey, we join the disciples, as they travel from the fearful group in the Upper Room to the explosion of Pentecost where the church was born. Our walking beside them is not only to hear again the story but to gain insight into what it means to become and be the church in this place. As we journey towards Pentecost, I would like us to commence thinking about what it means to be church. We will not specifically use the readings for the day, but we base this on the post Easter gospels.

Significantly, we can visualise the church as a set of interlocking communities. We are:

- A community of peace,
- A community at mission,
- A community of care,
- A prophetic community,
- A community of witness.
- A community of power.

These are concentric circles, which radiate out from the centre influencing the surrounding community, our neighbourhood, our families, those who are in our sphere of influence. To be the church, we are to challenge those around us by being who we are. But this is not something we can just do through a programme or an event. We do not achieve this through any training programme. It begins as we read from John:

Jesus came and stood among them

This is the beginning point of being church - Jesus in our midst. It is symbolised by the Paschal Candle, but it needs to be a reality in this place. Jesus must be at the centre. He must stand among us in all that we do and say. The fundamental question is "When someone joins us, do they see Jesus in our midst?"

So how do we know that Jesus is here? By the community he produces. When Jesus is here, things will change. Things will happen. Things will be different. And starting point of the community he wishes to build is in his words:

and said, 'Peace be with you.' Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you.

Jesus repeats this phrase and it is more than just a greeting. It is an expression of a desire - if you like, a prayer or petition, about the way things ought to be. Peace is something more than just an absence of conflict, but is the positive presence of the Prince of Peace in the midst of them. Jesus is to be the centre of the community, of our community and his presence brings us peace. Our starting point is not about resolving conflict, but bringing Jesus into the midst of us.

One of the greatest difficulties that the church faces is conflict. The experimental structures in the south with the new model of a committee run parish, are plagued with this problem. Much of the energy is dissipated in the resolution of conflict within the ministry team. Conflict resolution is the major focus of the training. Conflict is not of divine origin, but a sure sign of the competition of human egos seeking to assert their own authority within the situation. We have allowed the church to model the world in the way it functions. Jesus did not come among them and say perfect theology be with you, or exemplary behaviour. He said Peace. Christ-likeness is rather about submission not authority. As Christ laid aside his position of power and came to be with us in human form, he modelled how we should be as well. Peace comes, because we are prepared to go to the other. Peace comes, when we work for the best of the other for the sake of Jesus. Where Christ is present, there will be peace, yet in many churches, conflict is the norm.

The church split - which is so common in some parts of the faith kingdom is a sure sign that the plot is lost. So much energy and resources are taken up to justify a position, and the body of Christ suffers.

The community of peace does not exist for it own. Jesus said:

As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.

We are a community with a purpose. The peace that prevails should touch others. And we are a sent people, to those who are on the outside. This is not just about the giving of money for mission, it is about the journey that you and I make into the world to bring them the love of Jesus. It is not an accident, although it is something that we do as we travel the journey of life, but it is a deliberate choice to touch and influence the lives of other. And we are sent with the Holy Spirit. It comes like a breath, not a wind and pervades our very being, that we might be made Christ like. God is at work from the beginning and not just in the way of Pentecost. It is the presence of the Spirit, that will make us the community of peace, the community at mission. And we are commissioned with the authority to do Jesus work:

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

As a priest, this is a particular authority granted to me, to forgive or to deny forgiveness. These may seem like just words, but as the agent of Jesus there is the fundamental question, 'What would Jesus do?'

This is not a task I take lightly, and it can only be done as we find Jesus in our midst.

Is Jesus standing among us?

You be the judge, but this is the starting point for our mission, to find Jesus in our midst.

Christ is Risen

He is Risen Indeed, Alleluia!

AMEN