

210425 'On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.'" (John 20:19-23)

You can imagine it, I'm sure. It is toward the end of a long day for some of Jesus' followers, especially those who were awake before dawn who made their way to the tomb with spices to embalm the body of their Lord. The day did not go as expected. First the reports from the women that the body of Jesus was not where they expected to find it, in fact the body was not there at all, only the cloths.

Then Mary Magdalene gives her account of how she had seen the Lord just seconds after encountering a couple of angels. Later in the day Cleopas and his mate return from their stroll out with a tale that they too had seen the Lord, even though they didn't realise it was him until he had broken bread with them; at this point Jesus was gone. One senses the nervousness they were all feeling. They were locked in the room for fear of being discovered by the Jews.

We should not be surprised at this. Although Jesus was the one that the Jewish authorities wanted crucified for blasphemy, the Jewish authorities were not keen on this new movement, this 'New Way' to spread among the people either. We know this from what was said to Peter and John when they were brought before the council at Pentecost:

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. (Acts 4:13-18)

Now this was what happened in Acts 4 after the disciples had been emboldened at Pentecost. What must they have been feeling after the crucifixion? At least, at that time, there was no doubt that Jesus was dead, and if the authorities thought that Jesus was dead, they would not come calling. But if they heard reports that he was alive...Was anyone safe?

Besides, what had anyone seen? Peter and John hadn't seen Jesus at all. The women and Clopas and co., had they really seen what they claimed. Confusion and fear; what were they to think.

Suddenly Jesus enters. He shows them his hands and side, the very ones they had seen nailed to the cross and pierced with the spear. To those present, there was no doubting it was him. The words "Peace be with you", resonated with them on so many levels. How often would they have heard Jesus say those words to the people he met and greeted, those he healed and comforted, those perhaps he laid to rest? And now it was their turn for comfort.

"Peace be with you" though, was also an introduction to their hearts of an entity they had seen in action even if they had not seen him, so to speak, in the flesh: the Holy Spirit.

"As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (v.21-22)

For the disciples there would be no going back to their old life. Now they had new life and a new sense and purpose; to spread the Good News about Jesus.

I wonder how we feel about this, observing the disciples locked in that room? When Covid 19 came round we spent some time in lockdown ourselves. It was a very confusing time, what we could do, couldn't do, didn't dare to do, for fear of...

When lockdown was lifted, for some it was still so frightening they never even dared to go out for fear of catching Covid. Some people were wondering: 'will things ever go back to 'normal''? There was a nervousness about what the future might hold. There still is for some.

Whether things go back to normal depends what one considers 'normal' to be. I think if anyone looks back over any significant event in history, they find that finally, when people emerge at the other end of it, nothing is ever quite the same as before. Because we lived through the experience, we discovered things about ourselves of which we did not know we were capable. When the world around us changes; things are very rarely quite the same.

The disciple's encounter with Jesus was no different in this respect, because this time it was not just Jesus they encountered, but also the receiving of the Holy Spirit. This moment is an important intervention that underlines the unity of the deity in the Trinity. Another will occur at Ascensiontide when Jesus is finally drawn up to heaven to be once more with his Heavenly Father. A further occasion will occur at Pentecost, when the disciples are finally given the go-ahead to proclaim the gospel to others through the fire of the Holy Spirit they have already received on this evening.

I guess the question that I am drawing from all this is two-fold. Firstly, have you received the Holy Spirit? If you are new to encountering God then maybe this is the first you have ever heard of the Holy Spirit. If this is the case, do contact me as this is an important part of the Christian faith that you need to know about and encounter, if your faith is to be complete.

Secondly, many of us who are Christians will have received the Holy Spirit at baptism, but is that the last time we encountered him? Have we left him dormant in our hearts since then? Do we realise that our lack of engagement with the Holy Spirit restricts the engagement we have with both Jesus and our Heavenly Father? If so, then we restrict that which God wants to work in us. Worse than that, If we quench the Spirit, Jesus will not be as active in our lives as he would like be. Nor would we draw as much gain or benefit from our relationship with God as we otherwise would.

Maybe we are a little fearful of receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, or confused about allowing him to play an important, life-giving part in our lives? Then remember that before giving the gift, Jesus said: "Peace be with you."