

31 May 2020, Pentecost Sunday: John 20 19-23

The scene from the Gospel just proclaimed to us takes place on the evening of the Resurrection (Easter). Picture the scene: The Disciples huddle in a locked room, filled with fear. Mary Magdalene's report of encountering the risen Jesus has not made much difference: they are "turtling," closed in on themselves.

Jesus appears in the middle of their fear, saying, *Peace be with you*. In the ancient world this was a standard greeting, like, "Good morning." The Disciples had heard Jesus greet them like that many times. Now the greeting takes on new meaning, not conveyed by the words but by his presence. Jesus then *showed them his hands and his side*. Jesus wants them to know that he is no hallucination or ghost. Again, he says, *Peace be with you*.

Look at the context—they are filled with fear, a fortress mentality. Can we sometimes be in the same spiritual place? Can sometimes our fear and turtling hold us back from seeing Jesus? I do not think the specifics of fear are crucial; perhaps ours are different than theirs but no less debilitating. The amazing thing is that Jesus still comes. He came to them; the locked doors, barred windows and their own terror could not prevent his presence. Nor can anything we do, think or experience keep Jesus out either. He comes, always wanting to be with us. Dread and panic only inhibit us, never him. Fear fixates us on ourselves. It is better to simply put fear down. We can not only surrender fear to him, Jesus longs to take it. So, perhaps the basic spiritual attitude expressed in prayer, thought and action is this: *Jesus help me give you my fears, my need for self-protection; help me see you when I am afraid and feel cornered*.

Note, too: Jesus comes in the ordinary. Julian of Norwich wrote: *It is greater worship to God to see Him in all things, than in any special thing*. Have you ever had the fantasy that if only you could have some spectacular spiritual experience, then you could put away all doubt, fear and weakness? Although tempting, it is a useless fantasy. Jesus comes with every breath. We do not need special experiences; we only need our ordinary eyes opened to see him in our simple, common lives. This is the best gift to ask of the Holy Spirit: that we may see, know and follow Jesus in everyday life.

Jesus says to them, *Receive the Holy Spirit*. The Holy Spirit of God and all spiritual abilities are gifts. Our part is receptivity, and gratitude. Clearly, the Spirit's presence and gifts are not possessions, for Jesus next says, *As the Father has sent me, so I send you*. Having received the Holy Spirit, we are compelled to share God's gifts in every relationship and environment. Then the essence of God's gifted mission is given them and us: *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*. We now have the origin, the action and the shape of the Church's mission. Our origin is Christ, through whom we receive the Holy Spirit as gift. The action of mission is being sent, out of the assembly of the Church, in the Name of Jesus, into the fear-filled world. The shape of our mission is to share the Father's mercy and forgiveness. We see the object of our mission is to "make one:" drawing others into the healing presence of God even as we have been. We are to practice forgiveness, teach forgiveness, be examples of what it looks like to be forgiven and to forgive.

Being forgiven and sharing forgiveness births holiness. For me, this is what this retaining thing means. We are not to withhold forgiveness from anyone who seeks it, but neither are we to be on easy terms with evil. As the old saying goes, we are to 'love the sinner and hate the sin.' This is a true challenge: to live with integrity and honor, being easy on sinners and hard on sin. In perhaps many cases there will be no easy answers to what that looks like. Yet such are the real-world struggles in which we are witnesses of Christ's compassion for all.

Our witness must be grounded in this: not having all the answers—but living in trusting communion with the Holy Spirit who is *the Spirit of truth who will lead you into all truth*. Note the future tense: The Spirit *will* lead us into all truth. This is our continuing mission.

On Pentecost I bid you peace. The peace of the Holy Spirit to fill you, the peace of the Holy Spirit to send you, the peace of the Holy Spirit to make you more and more a forgiven forgiver, and thereby glorify the Holy and Blessed Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.