

## John 20:19-22 GO! - in the power of the Spirit

There may be some here this morning who remember the war years. For those living in England during that time, there was no escaping the war. People lived in the thick of it, whether they agreed with it or not. My dad, born in England in 1929, was 10 when war was declared, and 16 when it ended. It eclipsed most of his childhood.

For my English family - and much of the world during those years - the war was a fact of life. In London particularly, each day had to be lived in a state of constant preparedness, alertness and caution.

The disciples suddenly found themselves in a similar situation. War had been declared! It had taken out their leader. We read this from the Gospel of John this morning: [Joh 20:19](#) “When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, ...the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews”

Jesus' followers had come together again following the crucifixion, not only looking for consolation from each other, but for courage as well. They found themselves in the thick of political and religious conflict, and they were scared.

So they were gathered behind bolted doors. They were certain that sooner or later the vengeful enemies of Jesus would seek them out as well.

Jesus had repeatedly warned them that they would know the hatred of the world as He had experienced it; that the servant would not be greater than his master, even in persecution. And it looked like it might be coming a lot sooner than they expected.

Jesus' words have proven to be true throughout the history of the church. I was really disturbed to read a news account just before Easter that ISIS had kidnapped a Catholic priest in Yemen, threatening to crucify him on Good Friday, just as his master had been crucified. There are conflicting reports as to whether or not ISIS carried out their threat.

How often does the contemporary church also find itself behind closed doors, fearful and ineffectual, living on the wrong side of the resurrection? I mean, can you blame us? How are we supposed to combat something like ISIS? The problems in some places are so vast and the enemy so overwhelming that at times the church feels just as powerless as the disciples did that morning.

But on that morning, Jesus came to his followers and "*stood in the midst.*" He wasn't there to just give them a pep talk. He was right there, in person, assuring them that He would be with them forever.

His greeting, "*Peace be with you*", was far more than just the usual "howzitgoing?" It was pregnant with deeper meaning. In it, Jesus acknowledged his followers' fear, and dispelled it, by drawing attention to his presence among them. Everything would be all right now. He was like a parent picking up a frightened child, and enfolding the child in his protective embrace.

As Jesus showed them his wounds, he proved to them who he was, bringing hope and joy flooding into their hearts.

You know, it's hard for us to imagine, this side of the cross, what that must have been like for them. Resurrection for us is a concept we have grown up with in the Church. Christians know that Jesus rose from the dead. We believe it unequivocally. But for his disciples, to see Jesus standing before them, showing them his wounds, was something that defied all experience, all logic. They'd seen him die! Even though they believed in a God who parted the Red Sea; even though they'd seen Jesus do the most incredible things, - *this was really hard to grasp. This was defeating death itself.* It would have taken some getting used to.

Small wonder that Thomas, who wasn't there at the time, found this concept just a little beyond belief. Small wonder that later, Jesus ministered specifically to him, to make sure that he also believed - for all the disciples would suffer greatly in Jesus' name as they proclaimed the Good News.

In a way, the wounds that Jesus held out before them were also a foretaste of what the Church - Christ's followers - would all experience as they shared his message of hope with a broken humanity.

Jesus' greeting 'Peace be with you' also carried with it a deep spiritual truth - the disciples were now at peace with God, because Jesus had dealt with sin and death on the cross. This was a peace that no persecution could ever take from them; neither could death itself.

Jesus didn't leave the encounter there. He then commissioned his followers. They were given the same mission that the Son was given by the Father. "**As the Father has sent me, so I send you.**" said Jesus.

But they weren't able to begin this mission of healing and peace without the power and energy of Jesus' risen life. So even though Pentecost hadn't fully come, Jesus breathed on his followers. ([Joh 20:22](#)).

This was a most significant action. As God had breathed His life into the first man - Adam - and he'd become a living soul, so now Jesus breathed that same divine life into his disciples, so that they would be recreated and empowered for their mission.

As Jesus breathed on them He said, "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*" This was a foretaste of the Person of the Holy Spirit who was to come in full at Pentecost, and remain in them permanently after Jesus had returned to the Father.

Then the disciples were given the authority to continue Jesus' "priestly" work, that is, to proclaim His ministry of forgiveness. Jesus is the only one who can forgive; it is His blood that cleanses the sinner and sets Him free! But these disciples who had been breathed upon were called to be a forgiving, healing people. They were given the right to speak a discerning word - or make a proclamation - in Jesus' name, that would release the burden of sin.

This is not something reserved for clergy - though clergy are commissioned by the Church to exemplify this particular ministry. We are *all* called to a priestly ministry. In 1 Peter 2:9, we read this: "*But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light...*"

I suggested earlier that the contemporary church sometimes remains behind closed doors - acknowledging the difficulty we face in this world, but often focusing our attention inwards, ministering to our own, rather than stepping out onto the battlefield and engaging in the war.

If the Church is to have a greater impact on our culture, we need to take greater risks. Jesus has given us both the power and the authority we need to carry out the mission he has entrusted to us.

Jay and I relaxed in front of the TV last night, and because there was not much on, ended up watching a modern day rendering of the fairy tale Snow White, called Snow White and the Huntsman.

There was a scene in the movie towards the end where Snow White and her small entourage, endlessly pursued by the evil queen, had suddenly had enough. She was filled with courage and embraced her calling - to lead the people in battle against this evil queen who had usurped the throne. She put on a suit of armour, tied her hair back, sat on a white stallion, and charged into battle, with her army galloping behind her.

There is a sense in which we need to do something like that. There is a battle raging around us, whether we like it or not. It is taking place both in the spiritual and the physical realms. Christians are being increasingly targeted, the Gospel message suppressed; the poor are being trodden further and further down; and the natural resources of this world are being pillaged for profit.

Going back to WW2 imagery - we could decide to remain in the air raid shelter, cosy and safe from the war on the outside. Or..we could step outside into the fray - embrace the mission that Jesus has given us, and in the power of his Spirit, go forth into the battle. We will need to be canny, cautious and alert - but Jesus has breathed his Spirit into us; he has commissioned us; we have everything we need to be powerful force in his Kingdom.

Practically speaking - what does this look like?

As individuals, we need to be more willing to come before Jesus and say - "Ok Lord, how would you have me serve you this day? Who would you like me to talk to? Who would you like me to show love to? How can I proclaim and exercise your forgiveness?" This is fulfilling our priestly calling.

We also need to be willing to minister to poor and the marginalised where we are able to in a practical way; perhaps to give of the resources God has given us when called to; wherever we can, to alleviate the poverty and suffering around us.

As a Church, we need to come before Jesus and ask how we can, as a gathered body of Christ, make a difference in this world. How can we lobby for justice for the oppressed and the poor? How we can be a more welcoming, forgiving and serving community? How can we better proclaim Christ's message of forgiveness and how can we better support those we send out to preach Christ's message?

We aren't called to do this alone. Jesus has breathed his risen life into each one of us; he has filled his Church with the power of his Spirit.

Let us embrace this calling he has entrusted to us - and go forth, in his name.

Let's pray