

Easter 1 (HC) (2020)

A single word, yet one which sums up the life and mission of Jesus Christ. That word is ‘peace’.

It was the first word out of Jesus’ mouth when He appeared to His little band of followers on the evening of that first Easter Day.

As I have already suggested, this single word sums up the entire life and mission of Jesus.

Consider, for example, what the angelic host told the shepherds at His birth:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

Also consider how the Apostle Paul expands and develops this thought when he writes in Ephesians 2:17:

“[Jesus Christ] came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.”

The thought here being that God’s goodwill and blessing – His peace – was embracing the whole world, the Jews, yes; but also the Gentiles. All were being called into one family and fellowship. The old hostilities between tribes and groups were being taken out of the way.

Let’s go back now and look at what happened when Jesus appeared in that locked Upper Room.

I want to suggest that there are at least three layers of meaning to Jesus’ salutation of peace.

First, ‘peace’ was a common greeting used by the Jews. Shalom it is in the Hebrew tongue. It might be compared with our ‘good morning’ or ‘good afternoon’.

Yet, surely Jesus meant more by this word than a mere greeting.

Remember what all but two of the disciples had done following His arrest. They had fled.

Peter did not flee, but he did something even more dastardly. He denied he even knew his Master, not once but three times.

The disciples, then, must have heard Jesus' word of peace with a sigh of relief. Instead of recriminations, they received a word of grace. A word which said: "We're still friends!" Upon hearing this word, we are told they were glad.

But, the significance of this word goes further still. It has a cosmic meaning as well, I believe.

Think back to those early chapters in Genesis when God's good creation project went off track . . . when humans rebelled and as a result found themselves cast out of the garden, expelled from paradise.

At that moment, it was as if a wall had come down between them and their God and Creator. They found themselves in a state of alienation.

Jesus' proclamation of peace in the Upper Room signalled that this state of alienation was over. Hostilities had ended.

It didn't take President Reagan saying "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" to bring this about either. No, God Himself torn it down.

The old account was settled once and for all on the cross.

Fellowship between God and humans was restored. A state of Salome – peace – now existed.

The fallout from God's action, moreover, has come down to us.

As a result, we can now call God Father.

We can come boldly and safely come into His presence with all our needs, knowing He cares for us.

In the Bible, death is seen as going hand in hand with human rebellion and sin. But now, death, man's greatest foe, is seen as defeated and in retreat.

Because Jesus lives, we shall live also. That is the good news. In Adam all die. In Christ shall all be made alive.

All of these various strands go together to form the meaning of that peace Jesus proclaimed in the Upper Room.

It was good news then, and it is good news now.

Peace equals presence. It says: Nothing but nothing can separate us from the love and care of God.

Not the coronavirus. Not a weakened economy. Not death itself. ///

As in the long ago, Jesus whispers peace today, if we have ears to hear.

You may not be able to change what is going on around you, but you can change your mental attitude.

When you find thoughts of fear arising . . . when you are feeling lonely, anxious or overwhelmed, here is your prescription: Say, either out loud or to yourself – your choice -- the words of the 23rd Psalm.

And when you get to that line that says, **“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil”**, really bear down on these words. Take them on board in your life.

It is traditionally thought that David, the future King of Israel, wrote these words as a shepherd boy. But, Jesus, as the Promised One out of David’s line, makes them concrete and complete.

In closing, I want to share with you something C.S. Lewis wrote over a half a century ago. It was at the time the atomic bomb was gripping men’s hearts with fear.

Lewis’ insights in this piece still hold.

As I read it to you, I shall be taking a few liberties. In places where he speaks of the atomic bomb, I shall be inserting “Covid19”.

Here is what he wrote updated for today:

“The first action to be taken [in our present crisis] is to pull ourselves together.

“If we are all going to be destroyed by Covid19, let that disease when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about a microbe.

“Covid19 may break our bodies but it need not dominate our minds.” ///

To Lewis’ words, I would add a few of my own:

Let God’s peace, the peace which comes through the cross and empty tomb, be the only thing to dominate your mind.

Receive it from the lips of the Saviour. Live it out in the world. Share it with every anxious soul you meet . . . in the post office, at the grocery store, with those at the gas pump, with those with whom you communicate online. ///

Peace, a word for all seasons, but especially one for today.