

**Sunday 25 May 2025**  
**The Sixth Sunday of Easter**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**NT: Acts 16:9-15**

**NT: Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5**

**Gp: John 5:1-9**

On Friday I was in Broadgreen hospital for an echocardiogram. I don't know if you've had one of these, but it is basically an ultrasound scan, the same technology that is used for pregnant women. It meant I was able to see, for the first time, a moving image of my own heart. It was quite an extraordinary experience.

Now I have to say that this was just a precautionary scan and it looks as though there are no significant problems. For those with serious heart conditions, such scans might well be a source of anxiety more than wonder.

In my own case I was able to watch in a relatively relaxed way, as the chambers of my heart pulsed, the valves opened and closed, the blood ebbed and flowed. It brought home to me very vividly that the heart is in constant motion. All the organs of the body are - and they have to be. This is the pulse of life itself, a continual give and take.

We are never completely still, not when we are alive. When we do experience calm, stillness and peace, the motion continues. It may be slower, it may flow more smoothly. But always, the pulsing, the swinging doors of the heart, the electrical dance of the brain's synapses and all the other functions of the body are stirring.

There is a kind of restlessness in peace. Even when practising something like mindful meditation, we might focus on the flow of the breath, in and out, the movement of the chest, the touch of the air as it alternates hot and cold in the mouth and throat. In meditation and stillness, we do not stop moving, we become reconciled to it; we attend to it and let it be, with curiosity and compassion. It is a very different restlessness from those which are driven, fearful or aggressive, but a restlessness it is. In peace, we learn to love the breathing body, the beating heart, the transience of time as it comes and passes away.

The kind of peace and clam we experience in moments of quiet or contemplation might seem like a turning away from the world. I wonder how much the popularity of meditation is due to an understandable desire to escape from the demands of the world into a safe and private space.

But it need not be like that. In Christian tradition, contemplation *and* action, stillness *and* participation in the world are like two wings of a bird: each is important to what it is to have faith, what it is to be human. Peace is not merely emptiness. It is a resonance, a connection. It is the rhythm of a loving heart that binds us to the rhythm of creation itself.

In our gospel reading, we look forward to the coming feast of Pentecost and to the gift of the Spirit. And we also hear Jesus speak about the gift of peace he leaves with us. In the relation between the gift of the Spirit and the gift of peace, there is this same balance of stillness and restlessness.

Peace might seem like a simple thing: the absence of conflict. But, in the Biblical tradition, it is so much more. The Hebrew word, *shalom*, captures some of this. This is a peace of belonging, wholeness, reconciliation. The mere absence of obvious conflict can hide a multitude of repressed violence, fear and oppression. The Old Testament prophets denounced such false peace. As Jeremiah says of the other prophets and priests of his own

day 'They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace', when there is no peace.'"

True peace is not afraid to name the unhealed wounds, or the unjust oppressions that scar our collective and individual lives. The peace Jesus gives is not an excuse to turn our back on the world and its needs; quite the opposite. The gift of peace is also a challenge: to deepen that peace, so that it may be enacted and shared.

Peace is not passivity and submission. It is confidence: confidence that we and the world are loved no matter what. That fear and aggression do not define us. That we *do* belong and have a home in God, whoever we are and in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. This is not an easy peace, but one that transforms us and the world.

And the gift of peace is linked to the gift of the Spirit. In the Bible, the Spirit is restless. In the story of creation, it broods over the waters – loving and protective, but ready to create something unheard of, something extraordinary. As the psalmist says, the Spirit 'renews the face of the earth'. The Spirit often appears in biblical stories to empower people to overcome the odds. Elsewhere in John's gospel, Jesus speaks of the Spirit as going 'where it will' – untamed and wild, it is the Spirit that pushes the church to reach out to the world. As we anticipate the day of Pentecost, we remember how the Spirit broke down barriers between people and made them behave in extraordinary ways.

Newness and openness are marks of the Spirit. In today's gospel, Jesus says the Spirit will lead us into all the truth. The Spirit takes us on a journey. She reveals to us deeper dimensions of truth, as the world changes and our experiences of God become enriched. Faith cherishes what we receive from the past, but it is not simply repeating it. The Spirit guides us to be open to new dimensions of truth and faithfulness. This openness is integral to our tradition, not a betrayal of it. It is why we should never be turning our backs on science, or learning from those who do not fit inherited patterns of faithful relationship, for example.

Both peace and the Spirit knit us to the heart of God and communion with one another. But they do so in ways which name and challenge the ways we cling to self and security at the expense of others. They also empower those facing abuse and exploitation to find a voice and realise their freedom.

We do not fly on only one wing. Peace is not peace if it is simply telling people facing injustice to put up and shut up. There is no peace in a situation of domestic abuse. And when it comes to events on the world stage, we equally must avoid simplistic responses. This week, we saw a cold and unjustifiable antisemitic murder on the streets of Washington. Such hateful actions deserve our condemnation. But that in no way means we should not speak out against the outrageous actions of the current Israeli government, using starvation and displacement as weapons of war. The justification that this is necessary for future peace and security will not wash. To say so is not in any way to support Hamas and its anti-Jewish hatred. True peace cannot be built on prejudice and brutality. Without the Spirit of life and hope, peace can become a mockery and an illusion.

The gift of peace and the gift of the Spirit are two faces of the same reality, two wings of the same flight. And it is worth recalling that they are, first and foremost, *gifts*. They root us in the grace of God, in a love which we do not have to earn or compete for. They free us to love ourselves, others and creation. But they also free us to cross the borders of hostility and exclusion. They empower us to move out of our comfort zone and challenge our own prejudices and the injustice we see around us.

Peace I give you, says Jesus. Not as the world gives: not the silence of oppression, fear or collusion; but as the outpouring of the Spirit of openness, truth and compassion. Held by these arms of God, may we know peace in our hearts and be restless for the peace of the world.

**Fr Steven Shakespeare**