

Sunday 24 May 2026

Liverpool Parish Church

Pentecost

NT: Acts 2:1-21

NT: I Corinthians 12:3b-13

Gp: John 20:19-23

He stood among his disciples and said, 'peace be with you'.

They're familiar words. But what does Jesus mean by them? Is he promising the disciples peace on earth? Hardly. Is he comforting them, offering them a kind of spiritual peace? Perhaps that's nearer the mark: after all, he speaks of the Holy Spirit as the Comforter. And it is the Spirit who will remain with the disciples after Jesus is no longer with them in the flesh.

Still, comfort can't be the whole story. Lots of things are comforting, but they might be really bad for us, like that bar of Galaxy you eat while watching Love Island. More seriously, comfort can pull the wool over our eyes, keep us from facing hard truths.

So, what kind of peace *is* Jesus offering here?

There are two clues in our readings today.

The first is this: Jesus says 'Peace be with you' *twice*. In between these statements, he shows them his wounds. Why? Well, you could say he was proving his identity to them. John's gospel wants to make it really clear that Jesus actually did suffer and die on the cross – it wasn't an illusion or a trick. The Word really was made flesh.

But there's more to this than an ID check. What I mean is: the peace Jesus offers doesn't make sense apart from his wounds.

We might think of peace as the absence of conflict. That's a start, but it does not get close to the fullness of Christ's peace. The absence of obvious conflict might cover over all sorts of oppression and misery. Christ's peace draws on the Hebrew tradition of shalom. Shalom is a peace that means something positive: not just 'no war', but fullness of life. And fullness of life is only possible if we confront all the things that deny life.

In John's gospel, this is what Jesus does on the cross. He confronts and overcomes the ruler of this world. The ruler of this world is a symbol for all those powers which hold us in fear; in resentment; in rivalry; in separation; in poverty. Those powers cannot just be defeated in battle. They feed on violence. They feed on exclusion and sacrifice. How tempting it is to find a kind of peace by singling out people we can blame for our lot in life. Or perhaps we blame parts of ourselves. Either way, we become unhappy, divided, sick. We get a false peace.

Jesus does not take this path. He does not create new victims. He takes on the role of the victim. He shows us what our fear and rivalry lead to. And rather than coming to take revenge on us, he says 'Peace be with you.'

This peace brings hard truths. One is the continuing scar of anti-semitism that has accompanied the church's history and is rife again today. It rears its head already in our gospel reading: the doors were locked 'for fear of the Jews'. As if that word summed up opposition to the gospel. As if all the people in that room, including Jesus himself, were not themselves Jews. How easy to create new victims. How these old divisions continue to feed today's hatreds.

We'd rather not see ourselves in this unflattering light. We'd like to keep the doors locked, to keep the light out. But if we let the light in, let the truth land, then we find it is also forgiveness, acceptance. It overcomes our separation and bitterness. It makes a community out of scattered, frightened, divided people. And that community has a calling: to make this uncomfortable peace a reality in the world.

Yes, Jesus offers an uncomfortable peace, precisely because we need to be remade. We need to proclaim peace to a world that is still ruled by war.

The peace and the wounds speak with one voice. That's the first clue.

The second clue is found in the great story of Pentecost from Acts. The disciples, together with Mary, have been meeting and praying together. On this day the Spirit comes upon them. And people of different languages are able to understand one another again.

This is not just a random miracle. It is a reversal of the story of the Tower of Babel from the book of Genesis. In that story, humankind wants to build a tower that reaches to heaven. The tower is a symbol of the desire to have Godlike power. The unity of humankind in this story is a false one: it is built on a longing for domination. And that kind of longing only ever leads to the creation of new victims.

So, God destroys the tower, scatters the people, and jumbles up their language so they cannot co-operate in that way. It looks like God is just jealous and can't tolerate rivals. But we know it makes no literal sense to say that God is jealous. There is no rivalry between God and us or anything.

No, the story of the Tower of Babel is not literal truth. It is a myth that reflects on why people are divided, and it relates this to our devastating desire to be like God. It is a desire that breaks us apart, sets us against one another.

At Pentecost, this division is broken down. People are united again. Not by submitting to some dominating power or cause. But by sharing the freely poured out Spirit. This is the Spirit of Christ, and Christ does not come to dominate and destroy and create new victims. The Spirit is for everyone, regardless of ethnicity, gender, sexuality or anything we use to divide people.

The early church shares things in common. It refuses war and violence. It challenges divisions. Of course, it was also human, and it generated its own divisions and conflicts. That is the reality of the church down the centuries: it always needs to rediscover its calling and its heart. The church can become another tower of Babel, shoring up its own power, making victims of those it does not approve of.

But the Spirit remains. The promise is still there. And the reality can still be lived and tasted. The Spirit, as Jesus says earlier in John's gospel, blows where it will. She is unruly. She overwhelms our laws and borders where they only entrench injustice. She does this precisely because we need to be remade. We need to proclaim peace to a world that is still ruled by war.

The peace and the wild Spirit speak with one voice. That's the second clue.

Tomorrow is the sixth anniversary of the killing of George Floyd by American police – an event which exposed again the ugly sore of structural racism at the heart of a supposedly civilised world. He died after a police officer knelt on his back and neck for nine minutes. His dying words were 'I can't breathe.' The same words said by Eric Garner, another black man killed by police in 2014. The same words reportedly said by Javier Ambler, Elijah McClain, Manuel Ellis. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe.

The Spirit is breath. The Spirit wants the grip of violence loosened. She wants the victims to breathe again, fully and freely. She leads us into all truth – even the uncomfortable ones. *Especially* the uncomfortable ones. She takes us to where we can finally understand one another again, where the only bonds are the bonds of peace.

Pentecost is not a past event. It is today. The Spirit is poured out now: on creation, on us, in breath and in bread. We are called to share that breath, take that bread – and be that peace.

Fr Steven Shakespeare