

The Gift of Peace after the Crucifixion

Homily for the Second Sunday of Easter for Congreso 2014 at the Yakima Sun Dome

Acts 2:42-27; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

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Peace be with you! You will notice that this very scriptural greeting also comes from the beginning of the Mass – and – it’s a scripture greeting reserved ONLY for the bishop? Why? The answer goes straight to today’s Gospel from St. John where Jesus – after his crucifixion – bodily arises from the death. He then comes through locked doors, stands in their midst and says: Peace be with you.

But why? Why does Jesus say this to these disciples? Well let’s just start with the fact that this was the same Jesus whom the beloved disciple in his terrible naiveté could not possibly believe would ever be betrayed. And this was the same Jesus whom Judas did betray and then killed himself in despair. And this is the same Jesus who Peter did deny three times thus avoiding death as a co-conspirator.

Certainly, the scriptures tell us that these disciples were locked behind closed doors because they feared they would be next for the terrible fate of a similar crucifixion. But their fear at seeing Jesus was not this. No. When they realized the vaguely recognizable figure coming through the locked doors was the resurrected Jesus they feared he’d returned from the dead in order to exact revenge for their betrayal.

So what does Jesus do? Just the opposite! He tells them: “Peace be with you.” The Dominican moral theological Father Servais Pinckaers notes that: “One of the astonishing things about peace is that it usually begins at the very point where it seems most unlikely, with our recognition of our sinfulness, which is the cause of our conflicts and evils.”

What does this peace look like? Allow me to tell you about my first funeral as a bishop nine years ago. It was for a youth who had been confirmed in my parish in Seattle’s south end the previous year. What happened was this. A group of youths were hanging out at a party. A fight broke out. Tempers fueled by alcohol flared. One of the youths had a gun. Our young parishioner was shot dead.

The night before the funeral friends of this youth were milling about in the church parking lot. All were angry. Some wanted revenge. At the funeral the next day, I banged my newly minted crosier on the terrazzo floor of the Church, practically shouting: “stop the violence.”

But it was the father of the deceased boy who, at the funeral Mass – in broken English as well as his native Tongan – said he had forgiven the killer of his son. He then told everyone presented he expected them to do the same. He expected them to forgive the boy who had killed his son.

Could you do that? Could you do what the father did? Could you forgive the killer of your son?

If there's just a little pause in your thoughts that is good! That is good because – truthfully – none of us can find peace in the face of such random violence all on our own. This is precisely why Jesus, after his own violent death cause – in part – by the disciples, stands before them offering the forgiving peace that comes from God: “Peace be with you.”

Indeed, this gift of peace is so astounding that Thomas can scarcely believe it is the Lord himself standing before them offering his great gift of peace. Yet note the details of St. John's Gospel. Jesus tells Thomas: “Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving but believe!” Jesus tells Thomas to do this – but note well – Thomas never actually touches the wounds of Jesus. He sees and he believes: “My Lord and my God.”

This detail gives us a hint about how we will see the Risen Lord for the Risen Lord is not immediately recognizable to any of those who first see him. You may recall that the women mistake him for a gardener, the men at the seashore of Galilee think he's a ghost and the disciples of Emmaus assumes he's just another fellow traveler.

This resurrected body is one that goes through locked doors but also one that eat fish. It's a body that is visible but not recognizable. How does Thomas recognize Jesus? Through his wounds!

These wounds are precisely what make Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul the Second such great new saints of the Church – saints whom are canonized today in Rome by our Church.

Pope John XXIII initiated the Second Vatican Council to be a missionary initiative sending the Church to touch the wounds of the world as noted in the oft-quoted Vatican II document “Gaudium et Spes”: “The joy and the hope, the grief and the anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way are the joy and the hope, the grief and the anguish of the followers of Christ as well.”

Pope John Paul the Second focused this missionary initiative. Hailing from Poland, he noticed that what preserved Polish culture from centuries of repeated political partition, military occupation, warfare and cultural extermination was the Church. The Church is what preserved Polish language, literature, thought and culture. Pope John Paul the Second had the singular insight to see that faith seasons the culture, help a people's language and culture become their fullest and like salt does for food, prevents a culture from spoiling and becoming rancid. Faith stands inside the culture and in doing so becomes an instrument of healing, reconciliation and

forgiveness capable of providing us with meaning to stand behind the words of Jesus: Peace be with you.

Friends, as we take leave of this Congreso may we do the same. May we become better evangelizers of our family, of our friends, our neighbors and even strangers who come our way! May we become bearers of Christ' love, Christ forgiveness and Christ's peace. Seeing the wounds of those around us may we, like Thomas, see Christ! May Christ's words to us remain in our hearts: Peace be with you!