

Second Sunday of Easter 2019

Acts 5.12-16

Revelation 1.9-13, 17-19

John 20.19-31

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

So much happens in just a few brief sentences.

Peace, he says, twice even, thrice: one gets the sense that it is more an emphatic declaration than an expression of desire. When God says “Have a nice day”, it carries more weight than when we do, who have little control over how nice days are. So it goes for peace too.

Then, the fateful commission: *I send you*. And before we have time to protest that the life to which Jesus was sent did not seem very peaceful, what with the violent end that met him, he breathes on us and says to us “Receive the Holy

Spirit”, no less emphatically than when he pronounced on us peace.

He is not done. The next thing is, if anything, even more strange: he tells us that we have the power to forgive sins, or not. This seems totally unreasonable. Surely, he should stipulate that this authority can only be exercised if our judgement is consistent with God’s, or that our decisions can be vetoed in some way. But none of these sensible conditions and qualifications are stated. John’s Jesus is not known to be taciturn: and yet here, he is perfunctory, as if there is no time to waste with soliloquy.

And maybe there isn’t.

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Christ is risen, and in the light of the resurrection, we are a new creation: called anew and sent the world over with peace and with power to...what? To accumulate political influence and material wealth? To build

cathedrals and hierarchies? To form culturally appropriate social gatherings for middle-class introverts? To preach the good news that sins have been forgiven, and salvation is at hand for those who recite a prayer or participate in a ritual?

The Church is, of course, for better or for worse, all of these things: powerful and rich, pompous and ponderous, a collection of buildings—about 16,000 of them in the Church of England alone—and social clubs with a whiff of mystery cult about them. But none of this is part of the mission as we received it in the upper room, scared to death of death still, until he came and stood among us and said *peace* before he said *go*: release sins and retain them, which is to say, judge and forgive, be just and have mercy.

God knows, and historians do too, that the Church's record is patchy on this front: injustices and abuses have too often been overlooked at our convenience, and statistical irregularities too often interpreted as moral aberrations,

abominations before the Lord. But just because we are bad at something does not mean that that's not what we are about, what our purpose is, our mission is.

God is funny like that, has always been: from Abraham to Moses to David to St Peter, God has chosen people based on I don't know what but neither skill nor virtue, nor even really faith. And none of them really get to see God's promise fulfilled: Abraham does not see his children fill the earth; Moses does not enter the Holy Land; David does not build the Temple; St Peter dies long before there is a much of a Church built upon him. But they played their part all the same.

And now, as then, there is us, with our own contradictions and hypocrisies, our own fearful shudderings behind closed doors, our own doubts about the rumour that God is not dead after all, after all the philosophical arguments and unanswered prayers and societal changes and church scandals. Neither more nor less than

Abraham and Moses and David and St Peter, we are here, the people of God, gathered and called and sent and inspired, even when it doesn't feel very much like it at all come Monday morning at our desks and bus stops, with our screaming kids and gossiping co-workers, the world—politically and ecologically—crumbling around us.

It is precisely in times like these, these times that have come and gone countless times before, times that seem like if the end isn't near maybe it should be: it is in times like these that it is most crucial for the Church to be the Church, to wield justice and mercy in the face of human self-destruction, to cry with conviction against oppression and comfort with compassion those who are oppressed. My job, in the pulpit and in the confessional is your job also. No, not *also*: it is your job *first*. It is your priesthood—the priesthood of all believers, the priesthood of Christ whose wounded and resurrected body we all are—that makes mine possible, in the faith and hope that I can return the favour, can

support you in this strange new life to which we are all called.

Or maybe all times are times of crisis and of change, real or desired: but if so, then there is never time to waste, never time to ignore the cries of the people who more and more regularly now take to the streets in protest, never a time not to join them there when their cause is just and right. We will, no doubt, get it wrong sometimes if we speak out—if we, in public, retain sins and forgive them—but we will never get it right if we never step out of the upper room, never breathe out what has been breathed into us, never proclaim the peace he has given us.

There is indeed no time to waste, no time to wring our hands and gaze at our navels, no time to lose the courage of our convictions and quieten down for the sake of keeping some imagined peace. Our democracies are crumbling under the weight of distrust and demagoguery; our old enmities are reigniting, and new ones emerging; our natural world is a blood sacrifice on the altar

of economic progress. And if not for the sake of the world, then the Church must be the Church for her own sake. We cannot delude ourselves into thinking that God needs us: God is perfectly capable of moving without us, as we can see every day in the news, in the fact that the Church is conspicuously not at the forefront of these movements against corruption and pollution and xenophobia and misogyny.

We were once upon a time a body that moved, that changed the world: not so long ago, we rose again and again against slavery and war, for minority civil rights and universal suffrage, and to protect refugees. And we can do so again, can again do what Bartolomé de las Casas did with his faith and his pen and his voice, and William Wilberforce and Catherine Beecher and Martin Luther King Jr. and Dorothy Day. We can rise as they did, and the time has come that we must, we who have been sent with peace and the power of the Spirit and the authority to call sins out and to forgive them too. So, let's go. To the streets, to the polls; to Solomon's Portico, to Number 10; to

synod to parliament; to whichever nook and
cranny of the earth that needs peace. Go be the
Church. Go in peace.

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the Holy Spirit.