

SERMON FOR EASTER 2 | 08.04.18

Can anyone remember the actual year when Church of England congregations started shaking hands at the Peace? Was it 20 years ago - or 30? It was actually 45 years ago since those little green Series 3 booklets appeared in the pews – not just to enable us to physically exchange the peace at the Offertory but also for the first time to address God as ‘you’ rather than thee and thou.

So how come, after 45 years, is there still some reluctance to pass the Peace - to those we know and those we don't? And why is there perhaps an even greater lack of understanding of what we are doing! So, today, a catch up: the whys and the wherefores of sharing ‘the Peace’!

“Peace”. As a word it has so many resonances. Around the world this Easter, congregations have been praying for an end to violence and division in any number of familiar destinations: Syria, the Yemen, South Sudan, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Israel/Palestine, the Ukraine ... the list grows and grows. Newly we are praying for the new dialogue between North and South Korea. I was enormously touched by the programme that Patrick Kielty the comedian made about reconciliation in the North of Ireland this week and how he had come to terms with the death of his father during the Troubles thirty years ago.

So is that the kind of peace we first think of in Church? World peace? Peace with justice affecting so many countries today?

Yes - yes but: because there is also the peace that comes from our need to forgive one another which is built into our Mass, coming directly from Jesus' own teaching and captured by that little song: *Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.* Remember Jesus words: *Therefore if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your neighbour has something against you, leave your gift in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your neighbour and then come and offer your gift.*

What Jesus is clearly driving at here is making sure that we don't think we can just come and do our ‘religious’ bit on a Sunday while remaining as hard hearted and unloving as ever.

Pope Francis – aware, as all of us are - of the nasty bits of petty feuding that goes on in our families and in our churches, used his Maundy Thursday homily to warn people against holding on to their version of the truth without allowing God's words to actually touch their hearts.

To celebrate Easter, he said, is to believe once more that God is constantly breaking into our personal histories, challenging our comfort zones and breaking down our prejudices.

And he is right. Just coming into church is a good sign of our willingness not to get locked into a situation where we only relate and work with people who are like us. Throughout Mass we are led to think and pray for the needs of all kinds of people, both here and around the world. Our prayers of intercession rightly roam far and wide. In our heads we are full of sympathy, more than willing to ask God's blessing on those who are less fortunate than us.

But doing something 'physical' is much more of a challenge! At the 'Peace' we leave our seat, our pew and we are expected to make quite close contact with other people! And the temptation is to make a bee-line for the people we already know - and perhaps skirt around those we don't particularly know - or even whom we don't like so much?! Is that really good enough? Is that really the way of building up the kind of fellowship St John talks about in the 2nd reading?

And if that is really what is going on, what about total strangers or those who are a bit odd? Do they get just a perfunctory nod or a limp hand-shake as we look for the next friend to greet? Is there a kind of first and second class way in which we share the Peace? If so, why? Is it right to kiss some and just nod to others? Aren't we all equal and isn't a Church a 'one size' shop: shouldn't it be the case that if you kiss one - you kiss them all!

Because I hope that every first-time visitor will pick up from us those familiar words from the Book of Acts: *look how those Christians love one another!* Free of anything that divides and holds us back, we share the Peace each time we come to Church knowing that unless we are right with one another, none of the prayers we offer will be of any consequence or be in the least bit acceptable to God our heavenly Father.

But we have jumped ahead of ourselves. Because today's Gospel story relates to the time before there were such things as churches or liturgies for collections of believers like you and me. This story comes a matter of hours after the first resurrection appearances to the women at the tomb. The disciples are terrified that and are huddled together in a locked room, not knowing what to do.

And in to that place comes Jesus – unmistakably Jesus in every way – although to make absolutely sure, he shows them his hands and his feet. We can't ask how he got there; all we can do is to take the word of the apostles who knew him so well. And his words are: 'Peace be with you'.

And the word 'peace' takes on a third layer of meaning. It isn't an end to war and it isn't about the necessity of being right with each other in worship. This is much more profound: it is about the deepest internal gift of God's peace – *the peace of God which passes all understanding* as we often hear in blessings.

It was this kind of peace that Patrick Kielty was talking about. Of course he wanted an end to violence on his home turf, the remote areas around the Irish border with the Republic. But after his father was murdered when he was just 16, he had to come to terms with the fact that any end to the Troubles was going to involve the release of those Loyalist gunmen who had committed this heinous crime. As you can imagine, it was a very big ask.

And yet he had found that the only way to move on: the only way to receive a sense of resolution and that deep, abiding peace was to accept the necessity of forgoing the satisfaction of seeing those men locked away for very long terms of imprisonment.

Later, the programme showed a contrasting reaction as we saw him interview Arlene Foster, the current leader of the Democratic Unionist party. Her father had also been attacked by terrorists in those years – from the other side of the divide – although, thank goodness, he survived. But for her the sticking point, and the reason why she cannot endorse the Good Friday agreement, was just that: she cannot live with the idea that guilty men could roam free.

But as the camera showed us first Patrick Kielty, then Arlene Foster, and then a graveyard full of headstones marking the deaths of those killed by the IRA, it was all too obvious which of the two of them was at peace - and which of them still burned with resentment.

Jesus knew all too well the mixed emotions in the hearts and minds of the disciples. They had had time to do what we might do in the circumstances, to play the 'what if' game. What if they had stopped Jesus being arrested in the Garden; what if they had managed to suss Judas out and discovered the plot before he got to the chief priests? What if Peter hadn't denied knowing Jesus in the courtyard... could it have been different?

Guilt, sadness – a realization of how blind, stupid and cowardly they had all been – all these things would have been eating into the disciples from the moment they saw Jesus die. It is the kind of anxiety that stops people sleeping or eating or being able to function properly.

Jesus wasn't unaware of all these faults and failings – how could he be? But he also knew that they were the foundation for something remarkable to happen.

But first they needed to hear from him not just his reassurance that he would 'forgive and forget' what they had done. We all know that when we have hurt people and they tell us not to worry, we end up by punishing ourselves! We beat ourselves up about what happened long after the other person has forgiven us. It is hardly surprising that many people find their way to the psychiatrist's chair in an attempt to put the pieces back together.

What Jesus offers us is the spiritual alternative. Peace. Inner peace. Reconciling peace. The knowledge that we are accepted and loved for who we are and that God's love is not doled out only to the cleverest, the most worthy, the most fun or the most materially successful. It is genuinely offered to everyone.

And that is why it is so important that the Peace in our Masses is understood and is revered as much as taking Communion. We are not saying a jolly hello; we are not welcoming people into our community or celebrating our diversity. We are praying that each person may receive God's deepest and most fundamental reappraisal of how they understand themselves to be. It is the Easter theme writ large: we are not worms after all but the men and women for whom Jesus died – the one who transforms us from fraudsters into disciples, liberated from the consequences of our own willful stupidity.

Peace is Jesus' greatest gift of love because it turns us from receiving what we deserve, to enjoying what God wants to share with us. This kind of peace is not complacent or judgmental but deeply affirming. 'Peace be with you' is the token by which we share God's belief in the goodness of every single person.

So when you say 'Peace be with you', please don't withhold this gift from anyone – and don't rush. Don't think, either, that it is your good wishes that matter or your smile. 'Peace be with you' says: 'May you be 100% of what God intended you to be; and may you be truly contented'. Perhaps we all need Patrick Kielty's gift of being able to help everyone feel - deeply - at peace with themselves. In fact it just may be that you are able to give that gift to someone as you share the Peace with them this morning.