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The Second Sunday after Easter

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A THREE-FOLD PEACE

As in Holy Week, when the Church reads the passion narratives of the four evangelists, so in Easter Week the Church reads the resurrection narratives; and that reading of the Easter gospels is completed on the Octave Day of Easter, "Low Sunday", with the reading of John 20:19-31, the account of Jesus' appearance to the disciples in the upper room on the first Easter night, and again eight days later on the first Sunday after Easter.

There are many striking features of this passage from John's gospel, but one is the threefold use of the standard Jewish greeting ('shalom') by Jesus to the disciples: "peace be unto you". One assumes Jesus and his disciples often greeted one another in this way; but St. John found it worthy of special attention on these particular occasions. In the context of Easter, the latent theological and spiritual content of that greeting leaps into sharp focus: this is not everyday courtesy, but a gift and a promise of peace in the fullest and deepest sense: peace with God, peace with one another, peace even with ourselves, in a new creation at peace with God and fulfilled by his grace and blessing. In later Christian writings, such as the Pauline epistles, an expanded and more explicitly theological version of this greeting becomes the standard opening formula: "Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1.2). And Paul gives us the unforgettable formulation, now embedded in the blessing at the end of Holy Communion, "the peace of God which passeth all understanding" which shall "keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

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"Peace be unto you". Each time Jesus says these words in the gospel lesson for Low Sunday, he reveals something significant about that peace. The first time, he shows the disciples his hands and his side – the place of his sacred wounds, and evidence of the reality of his resurrection. Here is no wraith or spirit or hallucination. He stands before them, gloriously alive, in the same body in which he suffered upon the cross. It is a real body, visible, tangible, palpable -- St. Luke records that on this occasion he ate a piece of broiled fish and of an honeycomb in the disciples' presence. In assuring the disciples of the reality of his resurrection, he manifests the completeness of redemption. Nothing of the humanity which he took upon himself in the womb of Mary and in which he suffered on the cross is lost to sin and death: all is redeemed. Nothing is left in the tomb but grave-

clothes.

The completeness of this redemption goes beyond the restoration of what was lost to sin and death. What the disciples see is not a body resuscitated or revived, for Jesus did not "come back from the dead". He did not come back to the old life lived under the burden of sin and the shadow of death, within all the limits of finite creatureliness. Rather he "passed-over" to a new life beyond those limits. "Death hath no more dominion over him: for in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God" (Romans 6: 9, 10). He was "put to death in the flesh, but quickened in the Spirit" (1 Peter 3:18). Christ reveals to the disciples the human nature that has borne the curse and condemnation of sin and death, and has now passed beyond their power into the realm of infinite Spirit. So what the disciples see is not a body resuscitated or revived, but a body transformed, and made what Saint Paul (in the fifteenth chapter of 1st Corinthians) calls "a spiritual body", a body now fully responsive to the motions of the soul, and charged with spiritual power. The bitter strife with sin is over, and now he enjoys the full fruits of his victory, even the fullness of peace in the Father's kingdom, where flesh and spirit are reconciled. All is redeemed, and all is glorified.

Such is the peace which he reveals to his disciples on that first Easter night, the peace of humanity, redeemed and glorified. But he does more than reveal it to them: he offers it to them. "Peace be unto you". What has been accomplished in his own particular humanity, he has accomplished for us, and wills to communicate to us. As Saint Paul said, in words picked up in this Sunday's collect, "he did for our sins and rose again for our justification" (Romans 4.25). The peace which Christ reveals is the peace of humanity set free from the curse and condemnation of sin, and now, in right relation to God, capable of enjoying the blessing of the Creator. As St John's reference to the "first day of the week" (20:19) hints, it is the peace of a new and spiritual creation, the creature set to rights with God, and entering into his glory. The resurrection of Christ is the beginning of this new creation, and so he offers this peace to his disciples, to those whom he calls to his faith and obedience – and that means not only those already his disciples, but those who yet will be.

And therefore the greeting of peace is repeated, and a second dimension of that peace is revealed. "Peace be unto you: as my Father sent me, even so send I you". Through their witness to his resurrection, in the preaching of the gospel of peace, they will make many more disciples for Christ, with whom that peace of the new creation will be shared (cf Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:8; Matthew 28:18-20). In this commissioning of the apostles, Christ gives the church as a whole its apostolic mission. What is involved in that mission, and what is required of his disciples, is set forth in the remainder of John 20:19-31, to be considered in next week's Parish Paper.

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