



'The peace of Christ'

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

I pray that your inward eyes may be enlightened, so that you may know how vast are the resources of his power open to us who have faith. – Eph.1,18-19

Collect:

Almighty and eternal God, the strength of those who believe and the hope of those who doubt, may we, who have not seen, have faith and receive the fullness of Christ's blessing, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

Jesus Christ is alive today,

I know, I know it's true.

Sovereign of the universe,

I give Him homage due.

Seated there at God's right hand,

I am with Him in the promised land.

Jesus lives and reigns in me,

that's how I know it's true.

Anon

Jn.20,19-3

Dear friends

Who of us can fail to sympathise with the disciples and understand why they hid behind closed and locked doors after what happened to Jesus in Jerusalem? The threat they sought to guard against was real. They knew that in the eyes of the Jewish leadership they were just as guilty as the Lord whom they crucified. That they as his disciples couldn't expect a more lenient treatment Jesus himself had taught them.

The image of the disciples being locked in, of being locked up by their fears of those who had pursued their master, of being closed in and of closing themselves off from others, speaks to us of experiences that we are all familiar with. Not just in the sense of the natural instinct to guard against external threats, which is a good thing, but in the sense of the ways in which life comes under the sense of being imprisoned and a person becomes locked in to himself, of the way life becomes a thing from which we are separated as by a closed door.

Now when the disciples were gathered behind closed and locked doors on the day of Jesus' resurrection, it happened that the risen Lord came among them. Appearing to them in body he said to them, *'Peace be with you!'* and showed them that it was really him.

It is difficult if not impossible to imagine just how the disciples must have felt at that moment – we are told that they were overjoyed. But one true way of putting it is to say that it was for them a *key moment*: that a *key* was being applied to the disciples which opened them up and unlocked them. Not in the sense that the physical doors which they had locked *'for fear of the Jewish leaders'* became unlocked. Indeed, we are told that when the disciples were gathered in the same room a week later, they still ensured the doors were locked. But in the sense that they as people and within themselves through Christ's presence with them received (and experienced) *'peace'*: And what is peace if not a great opening and unlocking? (Think the announcement of peace ending war; or peace ending a feud between brothers/neighbours, etc.)

But what of the peace that Jesus is able to give and does give? We remember his words to his disciples, *'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.'* (Jn.14,27) The peace that Jesus gives is the great unlocking and opening of the heart (soul, self, person) that is locked into itself and is in hiding – in hiding even before the living God and the light of His truth. Is this not man – hiding from sight, bound to his fears, wrapped up in his own self, unable therefore to be at peace? Is this not man – the creature who needs peace?

Do we not see here precisely the distortion which explains why we put locks on our doors? Why we close ourselves off from the suffering of another? Why we cannot be truly open with one another nor with ourselves, and not with God? Why we are in fear of others and in fear of death?

There is a depiction of this issue in the Bible which describes it in the simplest terms. It is of Adam in the Garden of Eden after the fall. When he and Eve heard God walking in the garden *'in the cool of the day'* *'they hid from the LORD God among the trees in the garden'*. And because man hid from him, God had to ask, *'Where are you?'*, showing man that he was no longer in the light. The story then continues to tell of Abel's murder at the hand of his brother Cain, leading to God asking Cain, *'Where is your brother?'* and Cain replying, *'Am I my brothers' keeper?'*, showing that man was no longer in love.

What's described here explains that the reason we need peace is that we are in hiding from God's light and truth on account of our sins which we don't want to be seen, and that we close ourselves off from others because of the darkness of our guilt. And ever since, the two questions await the key

to the answer that would unlock the truth and light that they seek. What is the key to my being able in openness and freedom to answer: "I am here, LORD, and I am yours"? And to answer *for* my brother even with my own life?

But this key, dear friends, is what the cross and resurrection of Christ are about, is what they *are*. The key belongs to him who brings peace. In saying to the disciples, '*Peace be with you!*', does he not declare forgiveness for the sin of their betrayal, their lack of faithfulness, their selfish fear? Does he not cleanse them of all the unrighteousness that they have displayed? He comes into their hiding (not waiting for them to come out of it!) and says: "Do no longer belong to it, there is no need; I know your sins, I have paid for them; I know your fears, I have faced them, and I know your temptations, I have tasted them, and I have overcome both; even your death I have made mine, and now my life I shall give to you. Now I am with you and you are with me and in me you are children of my Father who is also your Father, my God who is also your God, and His love casts out all fear. What locks you into yourself, closing you to God and one another, your sin, in me is gone, it no longer determines who you are and shall be. What now has the say is God's grace. And when you let it – and as you do – you will know that I live in you and strengthen you."

So important was it that the disciples understood and grasped this that Jesus told them a second time, '*Peace be with you!*'

And then he sent them out to do for others what he had done for them, to make available to others what he had made available to them. And so that they could, he gave them the Holy Spirit, which meant that what they were to do in his name would through them be done by him, and would be received *by faith*. But what they were to do was to bring and declare peace: '*If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.*'

Dear friends, the gospel of Jesus Christ declares to all who believe that their sins are forgiven – this is the reality of grace which effects the great opening and unlocking of the heart by filling it with the love of Christ. Let us hear the word of grace; like snow remains where it does not melt, so sin remains where it is not forgiven. But all sin is forgiven that is brought to Christ.

If the reality of grace in the risen Lord Jesus Christ is accessed and owned by faith, is not this, then, our foremost need – to entrust ourselves with all our hearts to him who says: "Peace be with you!"

AMEN

Christ, whose glory fills the skies

- 1 Christ, whose glory fills the skies,
Christ, the true, the only light,
Sun of righteousness, arise,
triumph o'er the shades of night:
Day-spring from on high, be near;
Day-star, in my heart appear.
- 2 Dark and cheerless is the morn
unaccompanied by Thee;
joyless is the day's return,
till Thy mercy's beams I see;
till they inward light impart,
glad my eyes, and warm my heart.

3 Visit then this soul of mine;
pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
fill me, radiance divine;
scatter all my unbelief;
more and more Thyself display,
shining to the perfect day.

Words by Charles Wesley

Lord God, we give you praise for the redemption of your world which you delivered in Jesus Christ according to your promise. Our life meant the death of your Son, for when he assumed our life, he was made to be sin for us. But his death meant for us a new life, because he died so that we should no longer belong to sin and death but live for him. And this life is his life – the one you so gloriously brought to light through his resurrection. Praise, glory and honour be to you! Let us not forget what you have done, that our life is in him and is at peace, so that by faith and obedience we may wait for and see your plan unfold, which is to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

- time of prayer / intercession – [we pray for those who have become ill, are fighting illness or are recovering from it, for those who care for the needs of others; for those in positions of leadership and authority: that they may rule wisely and seek peace, that they may guard the values by which a society can flourish, that they may lead with courage and wisdom, for a turning to the light that is God’s Word; for those who have lost loved ones, need comfort into their grieving and the loving presence of friends; we give thanks for all the help we have received and still experience, for grace and answered prayers; we pray for the despondent and the hopeless, for those who seek light, for the wisdom to comfort the suffering; we pray for our sister church in Northern India and for the body of Christ worldwide and here; we pray for God’s blessing on the preaching and teaching of His word, for people to respond in repentance and faith, for freedom and liberty and courage to stand for what is good and true and honours His name;]

‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father. Set out, then, on a new life with Christ.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you.

AMEN

