

Breathing Peace

Acts 2:14a, 22-32; John 20:19-31

How are you? Three little words that have come to mean so much. During my Moderatorial year I found they became particularly useful when meeting the famous and the well-connected. Just as in everyday parish life, so people in some of the most highly-pressurised positions in society in our country and across the world were comforted by the fact that somebody, somewhere, at last asked them this very simple question. In many cases, when people dedicate their lives to the service of others, that little moment of recognition and appreciation can make all the difference in the world.

In this ongoing crisis, it is not only our physical health that is under threat, many are finding that their emotional and psychological health is taking a pummelling too. Humans, by and large, are social creatures, and long periods of isolation, or solitary confinement are not good for us. Loneliness was a problem in our society before COVID-19, and it is becoming more apparent now.

It affects not only those of us who live on our own, but also those who do share their homes with others. Stress between parents and children will ebb and flow, as many of you have been telling me. Tension between partners will also come and go too. What once was an endearing quirk of personality might be in danger of becoming an annoying habit that sends you over the edge. Tempers fray, silences deepen, and frost descends. Worse than that, in a lockdown, there is nowhere to go for 23 of the 24 hours in the day.

This crisis is like a magnifying glass over life. The people that have annoyed in the past will continue to do so, maybe even more so. Some will need your patience and understanding, some will need to get a grip and get on with it. You won't get it right all of the time. The good things will seem extra good, and the little kindnesses will pull you back from the brink. The weight of control over our lives, our movement, our choices becomes hard to bear. We understand, but we don't like. We accept, but we weary of it.

The pressure to do something, fill the hours, create routine, break routine is relentless. You hear about people learning to play the mandolin, or start learning Serbo-Croat, or organise their spice rack according to alphabet, heat, and colour, or cleaning their homes from top to bottom until the sparkle can be seen from outer space. I've seen it on social media too. Churches boasting about how many more people are connecting to them on their websites, or the bible studies and children's activities, or the prayer meetings, or the Zoom Kirk Session meetings. I spoke to a colleague in a very rural church last week who was getting grief from one of his elders about why the church wasn't online, or sending out emails of support, or doing all the other things that the other churches were doing. My colleague pointed out that since their church didn't have an inside lavatory, an online presence wasn't yet a high priority.

It's not a competition, everyone. We're all on the front line, all doing our bit in great ways like raising £15M, or in small ways phoning friends. Everyone has a part. But maybe, just maybe, very now and again, we need to calm down, and breathe.

And the days themselves blend together. I find myself checking my phone each morning, not for the date, but for the actual day. A friend commented that, "Until further notice, the days of the week are now called thisday, thatday, otherday, someday, yesterday, today and nextday."

Stress, and fear, and uncertainty does this to people. It was no different in the upper room for the disciples. Huddled together; the doors were locked for fear of the authorities. Jesus, dead, alive, what? Suddenly, right there, somehow. Don't ask for explanations, experience it. And again, rather than focussing on the 'how was this possible' question, simple listen to what Jesus said: "Peace be with you." In fact, so startling and so necessary was this that He said it again, "Peace be with you." And then He breathed on them.

Now, I know today, He'd probably end up with a fine, or a prison sentence for breathing on people, but let's get over that. What His friends and disciples needed to hear was the word, 'peace', and what, after their shallow, panicky gasping they needed to do was to remember to breathe.

Seems an almost stupid thing to say, remember to breathe. But how often, in times of anguish, or fear, or panic, or despair, breath seems to go from us.

Equally, there are times when it's almost patronising to say, "Peace". There's nothing worse than being told to, 'calm down', or 'relax', or, 'smile, it might never happen', or 'chill'. It often has the opposite effect, even if that is really what we need to do. But somehow here, in one of the many resurrection stories, I think it helps. The disciples, huddled at one end of the room, Jesus appears. If a shut tomb cannot hold Him in, a shut church cannot keep Him out. He does not rebuke their anxiety, He simply says, "Peace." He has promised peace, Jesus gives peace. He has promised the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, He gives the Holy Spirit, the Comforter.

From the place of death, Jesus comes with the gift of life. From the place of anguish and fear, Jesus comes with the gift of comfort and peace. He reminds them to breathe, and when they breathe, peace comes.

We all know these are anxious times. Not just because of COVID-19, but because of money and employment worries; because of all the other illnesses and conditions that have not gone away; because of the loneliness and isolation that is not news for so many who have lived with it for years. But this new crisis amplifies everything, and it is almost as if we have forgotten how to breathe. The world is holding its breath.

Will there be a cure? Will the restrictions end? Will I have enough money to see me through? Will I have a job to return to? Will I graduate? Will I get the results I need? Will I be there for loved ones if they need me? Will tomorrow be any better than today?

To all of this Jesus says, "Peace.....Peace...." and then He breathes. It doesn't stop bad things, but it helps us to take a breath, slow things down, take stock, move on. That's what the gift of the Holy Spirit offers. That's what Jesus offers.

I want to finish with a little spiritual exercise, for breathing, and for calm. I learned it last week, and on those days when the news was dark, it helped.

Put your hand on your chest, breathe in for one, and out for one.

Breathe in for one, and out for two...

In for one, and out for three... In for one, and out for four...

In for one, and out for five... And repeat.

It is still the season of Easter; of resurrection; of hope. And it's still a time when the world needs peace, and to remember to breathe. Today, this is what Jesus offers to the world, and to you. The gift of breathing peace.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen