

# Third Sunday of Easter

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## Introduction

Jesus stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' We called this process of writing and reading the lectionary through the lens of conflict, 'Spirituality of Conflict.' Today, we pause for a moment and think of the 'Spirituality of Peace'.

Having valued peace for a lifetime, it seems as fragile as ever. How do we hold to peace in times of refreshed conflict? What is the Spirituality of the Peace that we seek?

Questions I bring to this text, on this Sunday, are focussed on the word peace, and the concept of peace:

Is peace a process?  
What does it signify to win a peace prize?  
How do we quantify or measure peace?  
Is peace a brief moment of perfection, or an underlying theme of our lives?  
If we say we live in peace, what does that mean on a day to day basis?

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## Text

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

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## Comment

The response to Jesus' kindly remark, 'Peace be with you.', is that the disciples were 'startled and terrified'. The outlandish and shocking nature of the resurrection has perhaps been lost in the 2000 years of repetition of these passages since that first moment. What is clear from the text is that the disciples needed to be wished peace, blessed with peace, because they were not at peace within themselves. Jesus has several means of reassuring them. Firstly he says in simple terms that he wishes peace to them. I suppose that is obvious, on one level, but so often when we are trying to broker a peace, to negotiate peace, we are doing so with two parties who do not wish to bless each other with the words 'Peace be with you.'

What are the issues that rupture peace? I suppose we have competition over resources, fights for dominance, group identities that have conflicting projections over each other.

During my career, I have at times, worked on ending 'sectarianism', it was (on my part at least) a well-meaning attempt to broker a peace. The failure of that initiative, new research has suggested, might be because the identification of the issue as 'sectarianism' (the creation of a divide between two groups) might not have been an accurate description of what the problem was, and so it did not produce the solutions that were required to solve the problem.

Instead, we might have been better served if we had worked within my (protestant) community to end prejudice against, or hatred towards, Catholics. If we had endeavoured to say, as a community, 'Peace be with you.' Rather than to fix a 'divide' across which moral responsibility was easily slid from our own hearts and doorsteps, and onto a general 'them', and a vague 'other'. I found it hard, of late, to let go of the dream of fixing 'sectarianism', it had been something about which I deeply cared, and I had felt I had a purpose within that which gave me a moral high-ground which perhaps, on reflection, I did not deserve.

There are, fortunately, very few crimes of religious hatred in Scotland, but of those that there are 56% are against Catholics and 29% against Protestants, with the next biggest group being Muslims at 11%. Like many raised within the Church of Scotland anti-Catholic words, songs, slang, discourse was all a deeply accepted, socially adhesive, norm in my childhood. I was right to reject it as a young adult. I was right to look for peace. And, as I learned to value peace, the call to 'end sectarianism' was appealing for all the right reasons, but it wasn't enough. We need to end the casual widely socially accepted language of hatred. It took me a long time to see that, and clearly, others may still need to understand.

If any one of us wants to walk into a room and say, 'Peace be with you.', maybe we would do well to consider whether that offer of peace would be startling and terrifying. Perhaps, as Jesus did, we need to prove that our offers of peace are backed up by our actions, and, by offering a proof that our peace is genuine and not lacking in an understanding of the power of the unpeaceful words and actions of the past. If we seek peace as a means of personal glory, for prizes, awards or honour, surely that affects the quality of the peace we offer? To be genuine is to value the peace itself, first and foremost.

We cannot ignore the history, and simply start to mend an anonymous 'divide'. Jesus points back to the prophets as he tries to explain the resurrection to the disciples. He gathers history, theology, and his own presence, into the discussion as he gives them the space and help to understand what it was they saw and heard him say. The arguments in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland today about what the narrative of our history is, and what should be remembered or included is as much a part of continuing a conflict, or alternatively of curating a peace process.

When offering peace, we do not require anything of the other in the first instance. Just as it sat with Jesus, the responsibility to show we understand the history, and the current reality sits with us. We need to mend our own hearts, minds, attitudes, language, and accept that there is a 'divide' across which it is our responsibility to show, prove, demonstrate, however terrifying or startling it may seem to the recipient, that our offer of peace is genuine.

I am sure if you had asked me as a young research student, when I was looking for a mutual history of Protestant and Catholic in the pre-Reformation church, I would have included a hope to end sectarianism in my answer. On reflection, I see that my emphasis might have been misdirected, but the intention was still peaceful.

We cannot wait for the perfect allies. The call to offer peace, is a call to end hatred. It is urgent, and necessary. There have been failures, but there were also successes, and we need to tell the history of peace as we tell the history of conflict and the hatred that drives it. We write of the Spirituality of Conflict, but not without the Spirituality of Peace.

Can you think of an example of the triumph of peace?  
Was it a peace initiative, a reconciliation, or some other event or happening?  
What threads of peace in your own life can you trace?  
Is this a process?  
Or a cycle of peaceful times?  
Or is it hard right now to see past conflict to a peaceful time in the past or a  
potentially peaceful time in the future?

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## Prayer

Jesus who said, 'Peace be with you.'  
let me hear and see your peace.

May I respond with peace to others  
and share the peaceful love of neighbours.

Enable us to have the strength to hold to peace  
even in times of bitter conflict  
so that we may challenge hatred with love  
whenever we hear it.

Through the god of the resurrection,  
the prophets,  
and the scriptures,

AMEN