

Peace be with you

Sunday 19 April 2009

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Readings:

Romans 5: 1 – 8

John 20: 19 – 23

Sermon

'Peace be with you' those words must have been like music to the ears of the disciples, still trying to come to terms with the events starting on what we now call Palm Sunday and ending on Easter Sunday. The crucifixion and death of Jesus had to be the lowest points in the lives of the disciples – their hopes and dreams for the future seemed to have died on that cross with Jesus.

For a few minutes let us look at the events through the eyes of one of Jesus' disciples:

What an emotional roller coaster these last few days have been! From the high of entering Jerusalem in triumph to the low of Jesus' death a few days later and then today's events – well people will just not believe what we have been through! But let me start at the beginning – always a good place to begin I am told!

It all started about three years ago I was working at the family business – fishing when along came Jesus and said 'Follow me and I will make you fishers of men'.

We were not sure what he meant but he had a certain irresistible charisma about him and so we did just that - we left our work, our homes and our families to follow Him. Many of our friends thought we were fools to pack in perfectly good jobs, especially as we had no idea what we were letting ourselves in for!

Jesus gathered 12 of us around him. We saw him do absolutely amazing things he healed the sick even curing people of leprosy, made the lame walk, the blind see and the deaf hear! We even saw Jesus raise dead people back to life!

We also saw him carry out many amazing miracles, the one that stands out as the most amazing to me was feeding the 5000, with just 5 loaves and 2 fish – and afterwards we picked up 12 baskets of leftovers!

He did such great things he could even control the elements e.g. we saw him calm the sea and still the wind! Once when we crossing the lake he even walked on the water to join us in the boat – headstrong Peter even managed to do that until he got scared and called to Jesus to help him!

Wherever we went great crowds of people followed. He taught us much and when he spoke, well people listened intently no one had ever heard anyone speak like this before - so different from our religious leaders!

From the very early days of our work with Jesus it was clear that the religious leaders did not like Jesus, and so they kept trying to trick Jesus into falling into a trap. But he always turned their trap back on them always coming out on top!

We came to believe that he was indeed the promised Messiah, the one we Jews had waited for. But the strange thing was it wasn't very long after we started working with Jesus that he began to talk about dying! That bit we didn't understand at all.

Jesus said he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the religious leaders even that he would be killed!

Well this was not what we expected to hear after all if he was the Messiah then he would lead us to freedom and release us from the power of the Romans!

One day Peter, who was far more outspoken than the rest of us, cautioned Jesus not to talk about death, but his words provoked an amazing response from Jesus who accused him of working for Satan!

Poor Peter also does jump in with both feet, engages mouth first and brain later but we did feel sorry for him on this occasion because he was only expressing the concerns of all of us. We were certainly more careful what we said about his death after this!

Jesus was a brilliant teacher but he said many things that we didn't understand one I particularly remember now was 'Destroy this temple and I will rebuild it in three days.'

Well I mean this was impossible just as the listening Jews said it took forty-six years to build the temple in the first place. It would take weeks just to destroy and then clear the ground so to rebuild it in just three days – well that was impossible! It is only now that we realize exactly what Jesus meant!

Shortly after talking about his death a second time we started back to Jerusalem. What an entrance we had the crowds were lining the road cheering they were going wild.

It seemed at last people recognised Jesus as the Messiah this was the reception one would expect – even if he did ride on an ass rather than in the gold chariot drawn by fine white stallions one would normally expect of such an exalted person.

The triumph was to be so short lived though. Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver and they arrested him in the garden of Gethsemane. We could have put up a fight to rescue Jesus, in fact Peter, who else, actually drew his sword cutting off the ear of one of the high priest's servants. But Jesus would have none of that – he even found time and compassion to touch the man's ear and heal him!

I'm ashamed to say that we ... well deserted him at this point fearing for our lives. Only Peter had the courage to follow as they took Jesus away but just as Jesus had told us at our last meal together Peter denied he even knew Jesus – not once but three times!

It was only when the cock crowed that Peter recalled Jesus' words, he broke down realising that he had let Jesus down so badly, but to be fair to him he had displayed more courage than the rest of us!

Of course they set up a trial for Jesus but it was a mockery. The priests had decided he must die and so they got people to testify against Jesus even got the crowd to turn against him. So he was condemned to die a shameful death on the cross along with a couple of criminals.

They crucified him - an innocent man. Can you imagine how it felt to stand and watch helpless whilst he died a painful death? Our lives were in ruins we were leaderless we had given up all we had to follow Jesus and what now? Would we also end up on the cross? I guess the priests knew that without Jesus we were nothing, finished! We would soon disappear and life for them would return to normal.

Jesus died quicker than is normal but in the middle of the day it went completely dark. It was spooky to say the least but several people, including one of the Roman soldiers, concluded he really was the Son of God.

As it was the Sabbath coming up Jesus' body needed to be taken from the cross and buried quickly. I am sorry to say that we were too frightened to do this, instead Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body wrapped it in clean cloth and placed it in a tomb cut into the rock and sealed it with a large stone.

We hardly dare go out for fear of being arrested, after all Peter had a very narrow escape the night Jesus was arrested, and as I said he had to deny even knowing Jesus in order to save his own life.

After the Sabbath some of the women returned to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with spices, how they thought they would be able to remove the stone I don't know. But when they got to the tomb they found the stone rolled from the entrance and the tomb empty.

They came back telling us they found an angel at the tomb who told them that Jesus had risen and they were to return and tell us that Jesus would meet us in Galilee! Mary's words to us were almost unbelievable "I have seen the Lord!"

Later in the day we were locked in the room still scared of being arrested and still unsure what to make of this latest twist of events- when suddenly Jesus was there in the centre of the room! He just appeared like magic and he uttered those magical words 'Peace be with you'!

Course we thought we were seeing a ghost but he showed us his wounds his hands, his side, his feet. He even let us touch him and he sat down and ate with us, this was no ghost it really was Jesus!

Our mood changed Jesus was back with us to continue his work! He then did a strange thing he breathed on us and said 'receive the Holy Spirit'. Suddenly our eyes and minds were opened and all the teaching he had given us suddenly started to make sense - at long last we understood him.

This was the third day and that is when we realised that when Jesus had said 'tear down this temple and I will rebuild it in three days' – he was talking about his body not the temple building!

It happened just as he said and as written in the scriptures. We now realised it was all part of God's plan to save mankind from the evil one. Jesus really was God's Son and he had to die on the cross to take the burden of our sins, God loved mankind so much that he sent his only Son to die so that we might live.

The priests plan to get rid of Jesus backfired on them! It was all part of God's plan and now we have to go and spread this news throughout the world, Jesus Christ is the only way to be saved from sin, and Jesus has gone before to intercede on our behalf with his father in heaven.

We are still not sure what the future holds for us. Jesus has warned us not to expect an easy life. We will face opposition in the same way he did but now we can face this future confident in the knowledge that he will be with us.

An amazing story but it is true we were there and saw and heard these things with our own eyes and ears, but will people believe it?

Initially the disciples probably had little idea the impact they would have on spreading the Good News and how rapidly the church would grow. But they followed Jesus' instructions even though for many it would cost them dear.

In the story of the disciples lives after meeting Jesus there are several key phrases that were important for them but are as equally important for us here and now:

- 'Follow me'
- "I have seen the Lord!"
- 'Peace be with you'!
- 'Receive the Holy Spirit'

Jesus said to them: 'Follow me' – and they did! Jesus still calls people and we need to listen quietly and patiently for Jesus' call to us. We may already feel that we have been called and are doing the work Jesus wants us to do – but he may be calling us to do other work for him! Are we still listening and will we follow His calling?

Mary's words to the disciples having met the risen Lord were "I have seen the Lord!" Five words that, as Brian said last week turned the lives of the disciples upside down. Jesus still meets with people are we prepared for a personal encounter with Jesus our Lord? It may not be of the physical form the disciples experienced, it may be a still small voice calling us as it was for Samuel but we still need to meet with Him.

'Peace be with you'! As Paul said in his letter to the Romans:

'Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... (Romans 5: 1)

When we accept Jesus we have peace with God through Jesus and we should remember that God love us all and so we must strive to love one another. We should not only love our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ for that is so

important for unity in the church family but also love those we meet in our everyday lives away from our church family – for it is through us that they should be able to see Jesus active in our lives.

'Receive the Holy Spirit' - If we have responded to Jesus' call, met with him and received his peace into our lives then we should be prepared to receive and accept the gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

The Holy Spirit may manifest itself in many different ways in our lives. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12: 4 - 7:

'There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.'

The church, i.e. all of us, is made up of people with a wide range of gifts – but they are all God given and given for the good of all. We are no different from the fledgling church that formed shortly after Jesus' death, by working together and pooling their individual gifts the church grew and provided we do the same the church will continue to grow!

So 'The peace of the Lord be with you'!