

2 Easter
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 Fr. Bill McGinty

“The Jesus Story”

In the stories that follow Easter Sunday, there are two phrases that constantly follow Jesus’ appearances to his disciples: “Do not be afraid” and “Peace be with you.”

“Peace be with you” has subsequently been used in Christian liturgy ever since ‘Dominus Verbisum’ the priest would turn and say to the congregation, before the 2nd Vatican Council and we would reply: “Et cum spiritu tuum.”

In homes across Ireland, the common greeting from any visitor to the house was “Peace be to this house.” And I suppose just like the liturgical greeting we tended down the years to take it for granted yet, peace is such a fragile commodity that we tend only to miss it when its gone. Perhaps the peace that Jesus speaks of is the peace that resides in hearts where God has entered in. Hearts that are at peace with God are perhaps already at peace with everyone else.

In the Gospel today, Jesus appears to the disciples. It is still the Sunday and the disciples have locked themselves behind doors in a house for fear of the Jews.

John writes that Jesus breathed on them the Holy Spirit. From this time on the disciples, begin to change. They can no longer keep the story of Jesus to themselves. We see this in the first reading from Acts, where Peter and the Apostles are brought before the Council in the Temple.

In the years to come, these groups of men and women, who have remained relatively silent throughout the three years of Jesus ministry, now become very vocal.

The early chapters of Acts shows them to be together in Jerusalem, and then in Galilee, but this lasts for such a short time. Several years after the death of Jesus Paul sets out on his famous horse ride to Damascus, in Syria. His quest is to eliminate the community of Christians that has sprung up there. So already, the Gospel, in a purely oral form, the story of Jesus had found followers outside the immediate borders of Palestine. This is not hard to imagine because of the nature of Jewish life.

The Jews were by nature, traders and merchants. They were often the middle-men in transactions. Their caravans transverse the desert routes between Lebanon, Syria, Bagdad and Egypt. They traded with Roman garrisons, and across the Mediterranean with Cyprus, Asia Minor, Greece and Italy. They traded for salt in Sicily and timber in the Balkans. Their merchants met in markets in Persia and traded for silk and spices from strange looking people from the east.

Every community of Jews, who existed outside of Israel were called ‘the diaspora’; a Greek word meaning ‘the shattered ones.’ In every way, these communities complied with the laws and rituals laid down by Moses. This is what gave them their distinct identity, even in foreign lands and cities. Jews formed conclaves, in many of the great cities of the Middle East and southern Europe. They were seen as necessary, because of their language and trading skills. In truth, they used the Roman Empire and its rigid administrative structure, sheltering under its laws for protection, and greasing its wheels with the wealth they accumulated.

However, even Jews in the Diaspora had to obey Mosaic Law and that meant journeying to the Jerusalem Temple at least once a year. This constant traffic of people in and out of Jerusalem and Palestine heading for Greece, the Middle East and Asia Minor towns were already responding to requests to come and tell more about Jesus and his story. People wanted to know more about the story of the young prophet, the healer, the miracle worker, who lived and died preaching peace to all.

Amid the Barbarism of the Roman Empire, that found its strength in fear and violence, the message of 'peace' must have been both strange and yet for many refreshing. In 35AD 60% of the total population of the Roman Empire were slaves. You may have been a carpenter, but you are also a slave. You belong to an owner or a rich family. Your wife is a slave, your children are slaves and their children will be slaves. Slave families could be torn apart by being sold off or split up. So much so, that they never saw each other again.

Now, hear Jesus' words, 'Do not be afraid, Peace be with you.' Hear Jesus' words in that context and they take on a power that has somehow been diluted down the centuries. Peace, love, family, forgiveness, compassion, mercy, kindness, these were not words that rested easy with in the Roman system, where brutality, revenge, death and punishment, kept the whole structure together.

Yet these are the words, which are the legacy of us Christians today. To eliminate fear and bring peace into people's lives is a necessary component of our Christian identity.

Last week, Maryann and I watched a movie about the end of the world, as we know it. In "2012" solar flares causes earthquakes, the Earth's core to heat up; the earth's crust begins to crumble. A great flood takes place, where only 400,000 survivors in Government made modern arks. The criteria for survival lie with how much wealth you possess or how valuable you are as a treasure.

The Holy Week services come around each year and give us the opportunity to remind the world that sacrifice, love, forgiveness are the treasures that Jesus brought to his world and that they have made the world a better place.

They are all contained within the "Jesus story." The carriers of that story may and have, lost their way from time to time, but the story and its message never will. We may all, look at the news and see that even the Pope of all people, is in trouble.

We don't gloat over that. He is our brother in Christ. We pray for him and all the Christians in his care. We know that the story will survive. We just pray that our leaders will return to being the humble men and women, who Jesus originally chose. He did not choose men who lived in Palaces, or people adorned in fine robes. He chose those who had nothing and adorned them with his teachings and the Holy Spirit. He sent them out to tell his story and to bring peace to all.

You and I are commissioned to bring that peace to our own homes and to this holy place. On this low Sunday in the churches year let us take to heart the greeting of Jesus: "Do not be afraid. Peace be with you." Amen+

