

### **Third Sunday of Easter. 15 April 2018. Peace.**

My text for this morning is the end of Luke 24, verse 36. Jesus said “Peace be with you.”

A few years ago I went to England and one night in Cambridge I felt like fish and chips, as you do. The local pub presented me with a large plate with some reasonably nice fish, a large pile of almost cooked chips and ... a large pile of green mush. It was my first such encounter. I had heard of mushy peas. I just hadn't met them before.

I am not a fan of mushy peas, especially not with fish and chips. No offence to people who like their peas mushy. It just isn't me. I like peas to be more solid, substantial, easier to get hold of.

I feel the same about peace. Mushy peace also exists. Some approaches to peace are very soft. There is an approach to peace which seems to consider that it is all about suppressing violence and about surface appearances. Neville Chamberlain, Prime Minister of Great Britain, returning from Munich in 1938 proclaiming loudly about 'peace for our time' comes to mind. There is an approach which looks for easy peace which may so easily prove false.

I prefer peace to be more solid, something more substantial, something you can get your teeth into.

Peace is not the absence of violence. Peace is not the absence of conflict. Peace is not even when everything is calm. Peace is something far more than being able to breathe in.

Peace is something active, an active presence, an active engagement. It is a breath out which is creative and engaged. Peace is the presence of justice and mercy.

The disciples were anything BUT peaceful. They were terrified. They were stuck. They were trapped by their own fears. They were looking inward and in some ways what they were hoping for was for everything to just go away, for the danger to end, for there to be clarity about what had happened and then just to be able move on with their lives, perhaps even to move back to what they used to do before being with Jesus turned everything upside down.

Jesus appearing among them would have seemed like anything but bringing peace. The stress levels in that room were going through the roof. Jesus said “Peace be with you.”

Jesus reassured the people in that room in many ways. He reassured them that he was truly there. He reassured them by giving them space and confidence to look at their fears and set them aside. He opened their minds to be able to consider the past, present and future in ways which they had not been able to recognise when they were so blinded by the tension that they were wanting the world just to stop.

Jesus said “Peace be with you” but the peace he gave was not smoothing over and patting everything down so that it all felt ok. Jesus stirred them up. He gave them a renewed perspective on life. Finding peace meant being MORE active, it meant being more engaged. As we see from the stories which followed, it meant more conflict for the disciples, more confrontation, more standing up for what is right and true and life-giving.

Pursuing peace was anything but 'peaceful' in the mushy peas kind of way. It was vigorous and costly.

Our world needs more peace. It needs more robust desire for justice and mercy and less of what may just make us feel comfortable. Less on the surface and more of the heart.

Our world needs more peace. Yesterday rockets were fired by the forces of the USA, UK and France on certain targets in Syria. The world feels like a scarier place than it was even a short time before. The political issues across that region of the world are incredibly complex, blurred by so many past mistakes. In the past the USA has turned a blind eye to the use of chemical weapons by countries it was courting for advantage. Not this time, but Syria is not likely to be a supporter of the USA. This is a battle over trade routes, oil and control of resources essential to western economies.

It is also a battle over ideologies and longstanding struggles. In the past the three countries which fired those weapons, and Russia which is standing on the opposite side of the immediate conflict, have all played manipulative games, funding terrorists, funding fundamentalists and extremists, even funding both sides of conflicts when it seemed expedient. There is no moral high ground in this latest part of the tragedy of the Middle East.

Did Assad order use of chemical weapons against his own citizens? Probably. Do the western powers really care about the loss of life? Probably not. Will this action help the situation? Probably not. It may well make things a lot worse.

Peace will not come in that region when the fighting stops. Peace will come when there is a deeper commitment to justice, deeper caring about the lives of people, deeper attention to mercy.

In Arabic and the related languages which are used across that region, the standard greeting when meeting another person is “Salaam aleikum.” Peace be with you. And the response “Aleikum u salaam” And with you be peace. It should sound familiar. We use basically that greeting in the middle of our services.

Salaam, shalom, peace as we find it in the Bible and in the heart of God is about taking active measures to create a more just and merciful world. When, in the Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew 5) Jesus said “blessed are the peacemakers” he wasn’t praising those who calm things down. He was praising those who engage in life so that it will be better for all, more vibrant and whole and integrated and beneficial.

What should our prayer be today for Syria? For an end to the warfare which has all but completely destroyed that beautiful country, certainly. For an end, also, to short sighted strategies and game playing by the western powers and Russia, shadow boxing in a renewed cold war by proxy.

We pray for peace, which will come through justice and renewal and rebuilding.

And when we pray for peace for ourselves we need also to attend to what that peace will mean in our lives, our relationships, our community. Where will we discover and promote and enhance justice? Where will there be mercy? Where will there be more difficult engagement to seek reconciliation, real change, honest new beginnings out of situations of pain?

You see why I am not a fan of mushy peas, or mushy peace.

May we pursue justice, and mercy, and respect and renewed life grounded in hope. These things can happen. We are witnesses of renewed life in which this is possible.

Amen.

**Paul Mitchell**