

SERMON FOR THE DIOCESE OF BUNBURY: 14/4/2023

EASTER 2: JN 20:19-31

GEOFF CHADWICK

“THE EASTER SEASON”

We have begun our season of Easter. Even though the shops have stopped selling Easter Eggs our Easter celebration is meant to continue for 50 days until the day of Pentecost. This represents the period given to Jesus’ post resurrection appearances in the gospels. So, we have a great 50 day party to celebrate (Significantly, it is longer than the 40 day fast of Lent).

Partying however can exhaust us. How long can we maintain the joy and passion for new life we are meant to have as Easter people? How long is it before we fall back into the old deathly ways of life? By “deathly ways” I mean the old things of life which hinder the development of love and life between us as human beings. The things of which lock us behind closed doors.

Can we really sustain the party of new life? Will our Easter season make it into next week, let alone into the next nine weeks? Will all this new life ultimately drain us of our life?

Well the answer is yes. If the new life we rely on at Easter time is simply based on our own efforts then we will surely fail. Easter life is not something that we create ourselves. Easter life is something created within us by the Spirit of God.

The resurrected Jesus comes to his fearful disciples, locked behind closed doors and says:

“Peace be with you... Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you...”Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20:19ff, NRSV).

Here, the one of new life offers new life as gifts. There are three gifts: peace, The Holy Spirit, and forgiveness. Without these gifts our Easter season cannot last. Without these gifts we cannot resource ourselves for the task of living and leading people to new life.

So we must rely on these gifts. We must accept peace, we must accept The Holy Spirit and we must accept forgiveness. Without these things our new life party is not possible.

Peace:

The biblical concept of peace is a complex one. It means more than the absence of warfare. It refers to a state of “the best” or blessedness for someone. In biblical terms, to be at peace with your brother or sister is not just that you are not fighting, but that you are actively working in the best interests of them. To be at peace is not to be passive, but to be partaking actively in the blessing actions of God. Peace does not come to the Balkans when the bombs stop dropping – true peace comes when the Serbs and the Albanians desire to work for what is best for the other. This may seem like a vain hope, but we all know that this is the only sort of peace which can last.

It is the same within families, church groups or any human organisation. True peace can only come when each party desires what is the best for the other. I'm not talking about well meaning "do-gooderism" here. I'm talking about true and honest relationships which are founded on the principle of unconditional love. Such peace may be elusive, but when found it is a most joyous thing to behold.

The Holy Spirit:

The Holy Spirit as a person of the Holy Trinity is worthy of much study. Today I limit myself to the concept of the Holy Spirit as breath. Symbolically, Jesus breathed on his disciples as he told them to receive the Holy Spirit. This symbol was not lost on them. In biblical times the words for breath and spirit were synonymous. The ancients recognised that all living things breathed. To cease breathing was to die, and because God was the source of life, breath symbolised the presence of God. Thus the resurrected Jesus breathing on his disciples is breathing resurrected life into them. He is telling them that God is present. He is telling them that life is found with him even after crucifixion. He is gifting them the Spirit who would later be described as: "... the Lord, the giver of life" (Nicene Creed). This Spirit, I believe, is meant to be just that – "the giver of life". We, however, become dispirited whenever life is taken away from us. Our Easter party loses its zest and we wonder what happened.

But our Easter party does continue. It continues whenever we dare to offer life to another. It continues whenever we do something about the fear in those locked behind

closed doors. It comes when we, like Jesus, live a life of “wasteful” love giving. Wherever there is new life the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the give of life has surly gone before.

Forgiveness:

Without forgiveness our Easter party can become a self-indulgent excess. But the party has a serious side. We celebrate not for celebration’s sake, we celebrate because life changing events usually come at a cost. In Jesus’s case it was his life. For us it may be other things. Think about those fearful disciples for a moment. Would not Judas the betrayer need forgiveness? Would not Peter the denier need forgiveness? And Thomas the doubter – would not he need forgiveness? Without forgiveness these disciples could not have appropriated new life to its full extent. Without some assurance that the past was past then their Easter party would not have happened.

We are no different from those disciples. There are things of the past, which, if held on to, will stop us from receiving new life. There are things which need forgiveness. Things to left behind that our Easter party might be real.

Our Easter season might be for 50 days, but the party is much longer than that – it has been going for 2000 years. This is a party that no millennium bug can disrupt – this is a party that will continue - provided there are people prepared to accept the gifts of the resurrected Jesus. Three gifts: peace, The Holy Spirit and forgiveness.

The resurrected Jesus comes to his fearful disciples, locked behind closed doors and says: “Peace be with you... Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you...”Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20:19ff, NRSV).

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.