

2nd Sunday of Easter Homily.



There's a convent of sisters at Ein Karem, where the Visitation is said to have taken place, just outside Jerusalem. The sisters welcome people of all faiths to their guest house, they employ people from Israel and Palestine to work there. When they go into the chapel they sing the psalms in Hebrew, just as they have been sung for many centuries. In ancient times, when Jews came to Jerusalem on pilgrimage they prayed them together as they walked or as they entered the Temple, and you can imagine a cantor leading them in today's psalm, a psalm for the Feast of Tabernacles, and then responding to each line, 'His love has no end.'

As you walk in the garden at Ein Karem which is high up overlooking a valley, it is really a place of peace. A place of harmony.

As Jesus begins his new Church in today's gospel, he begins it with a gift of peace. The Church has to be a place of peace (however much we have failed over the years.) But this has to be our aim.

As we have said before, peace, shalom in Hebrew, means more than just peace, but harmony, at-one-with-yourself-ness, integrity of person and community.

In the first reading that is exactly what the early Church is looking for. None of their members was in want, it says, money was brought and distributed to those in need.'

So, for harmony, to follow the gift of peace, in the gospel, comes a gift of reconciliation. The forgiveness of sins. This is certainly the start of the sacrament, but it is also what is needed to re-establish peace in a community. We can see today how so many communities around the world, close to home and further afield, need this so badly. Without it peace is so easily and quickly lost, and takes so much time and hard work to restore. So often behind the immediate conflicts are the actions of those who are not interested in peace, or even see peace as a threat to their position. They need the most forgiveness.

None of this is possible unless we look at what Christ has done for us. There are two gifts we have mentioned here already, but the one that ensures that this is all possible is that Jesus himself, crucified yet now the Risen Lord, bearing the power of the Holy Spirit, breathes God's life into this new community.

We might well ask ourselves why our history and our Church's history has not been one of complete peace then.

But immediately we have the story of Thomas. Although it is hard not to sympathise with him, Thomas exhibits all the cynicism and lack of openness to faith, lack of openness to mystery, that our world so often settles for.

Yes, there is the Spirit of God breathed into us, but we have to believe in it and its power. Not only that, but we have to believe in the power of God's love for us that is behind all of his actions.

This gospel, the end of Chapter 20, is considered by most scholars to have been the original end of the gospel. The last lines sum up what John is about in writing this gospel, 'These signs are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name..'

What is this life? Life here is almost interchangeable with love. As one commentator said: 'John's Good News, his gospel, is not impressed by the separation of death.' To John, once we believe, once we welcome and trust in God's love for us, everything else becomes incidental, even death. Jesus says to Thomas, 'You believe because you can see me, blessed are those who have not seen and yet perceive.'

At a funeral this week the family did not wish to say much about the person who had died as they all had their own memories. So I ended up speaking about the love he and his wife had shared, and our belief that that continues in heaven. This is what John is talking about. When our love here is that strong, it is from God, as the second reading said, 'We can be sure that we love God's children if we love God himself and do what he commanded us...', and surely that continues. In a way, what we are to be like in heaven is defined by love. Strangely I think we often have an inkling if we have loved, even if we do not believe, that love will continue somehow. Hollywood certainly thinks so, if 'Ghost', or 'P.S. I love you,' are anything to go by and many other films.

To build a Christian community you have to have love and forgiveness at the heart of it, you have to believe that whatever happens the power of God's love is there supporting it, and there has to be peace, not just quiet, but a just peace, where people feel at home, treated equally, and each as a respected member of the community, that can welcome all visitors, like the Sisters of Zion in Ein Karem, who live in peace in the middle of one of the most troubled places in the world.