

Reflection on Luke 24:36–48

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As-salam laykum—“Peace be with you.” A post-resurrection Jesus stands among the disciples and offers a traditional middle eastern greeting. At some level, there is nothing unusual or extraordinary about Jesus’ words—*as-salam laykum*. This greeting would be exchanged by people in Jesus’ culture thousands of times a day—still is, in fact. It is the equivalent of “Hello, how are you?” or, if you prefer, “G’day, mate!”

And yet, the greeting “peace be with you” has transcended time and culture to be woven into the timeless fabric of Christian liturgy. Someone like me says, “Peace be with you,” and you respond, “And also with you.”

Peace is both a grace of the Christian life and it is our shared mission as Christian community.

Hopefully, each of us knows something of what it is to receive peace from God whose reconciling, consoling Spirit is breathed out upon us daily. In moments of stillness and quiet or when we are paying attention, we are able to breathe in deeply of this peace and we find our fears tempered, our anxieties soothed. We feel at one with ourselves and the world.

But as the Gospel suggests, this peace is not ours to enjoy alone. “You are witnesses,” says Jesus. There is a pointing, a directive here—*Go and be* people of reconciliation and peace. We receive and are filled in order that we might embody and give.

The nurturing of safe space where friendship, belonging and ennoblement can flourish is part of our calling as a church, a calling that was affirmed at our recent community meeting. This mission is manifested through the sharing of stories and growth in understanding and regard as we worship and serve together.

But peace making is not easy. Yes, some days are full of laughter and the flow seems easy. Christ’s Spirit seems to take hold and something wonderful arises in the mix of our differences. But even then, there is always the potential for fleeting moments when any one of us might feel unsettled or nettled and we are invited to self-examination and a widening of the heart.

The response of one of our volunteers this week symbolises this reality for me. After a brief, duplicitous exchange between himself and someone in the Community Care room, he said with a reddened face and watery eyes, “Human beings can be so disappointing sometimes.” I heartily agreed and said, “Yes, we can be,” and we chuckled together.

So what does the Gospel seem to make of these realities? What are we to do about the tug of the heart, the rise in blood pressure that are inevitable when we remain open to one another and to life?

In showing his hands and feet to his disciples, Jesus reminds us of *the way and cost of peace*. Jesus taught by example that hate is not conquered with more hate. True peace does not come about through violence. Hostilities cannot be disarmed with oppression and coercion. Hurt and resentment are not quelled with more hurt or through withdrawal and suppression as is often our more convenient response.

No, to be witnesses of the peace of Christ *in the way of Christ* is to draw near to one another—as God in Jesus drew near to us. It is to endure the pain of this nearness when required. For love asks us to see and acknowledge the otherness of the other, and this can be painful.

Many of you may have received and read the prayer we offered here at St. Andrew’s on Tuesday as our Muslim friends began Ramadan. It was a prayer of blessing at the beginning of this holy season which I confess I wrote and presented with some nervousness and a mixture of feelings.

Part of me recognises and wishes to support the journey of those who are Muslim within the St. Andrew’s family. Especially last year when most of the service centres were closed because of the pandemic and people were forced to travel beyond their familiar neighbourhoods for support, some days it seemed there were as many women wearing headscarves in the hall as volunteers wearing aprons.

But part of me is also aware of those in the St. Andrew’s family who might harbour negative and even painful associations when it comes to Ramadan in particular and Islam in general. Some of these perspectives arise out of a lack of understanding or because of negative press—especially in our post 9/11 world. But for some, their view is born out of a lived experience of oppression, persecution and dislocation.

For example, I opened up an honest conversation on Tuesday with one of the newer faces at St. Andrew's who is a refugee from Iran. Drawing his attention to the prayer on the table, I asked how it sat with him. After reading it, he said, "It's because of 'these,'" pointing to the word "Muslim" in the prayer "that we have problems."

Knowing a little of our friend's story, I can sympathise with his feelings. At twenty-six years old, he is alone as a refugee in Australia trying to make a fresh start. I can only imagine what he's endured and how difficult it must be for him.

As I listen and observe, I have a growing awareness of the significant possibilities that exist to witness to Christ's peace right here, in our community, in this space. For beneath any gathering of human beings runs an undercurrent of hostilities, hurt and resentments in need of healing and reconciliation. The Gospel does not offer platitudes or easy fixes. But it does, I think, reveal in Jesus what peace-making looks like and calls us to embody it.

In a short video for the Awareness Foundation, Rowan Williams says that when Jesus breathes peace on the disciples, he doesn't simply wish them "a quiet life." Rather, Jesus has in mind something more positive and proactive. Williams goes on to say:

The peace that lasts is that frame of mind which opens oneself up to the gift God wants to give in the other. When we are fully at peace, we are not simply sitting still with our eyes shut. We are embracing what comes to us from our neighbour. So to create peace is to create that kind of relationship, a joyful relationship. Yes, a secure and a stable relationship, but one also that is growing and developing all the time because of our joy in one another.

And joy happens when we begin to go beyond being afraid of one another. We hear in scripture that perfect love casts out fear and so what we're talking about in building peace is addressing the roots of our fear. If we can get beyond that, then there is indeed a positive peace to be won, to be lived in, something far more than just an absence, but the active presence to one another of people who honour, who treasure, who love and who delight in each other.

What Williams and others like him encourage is for us to recognise that what we see and know—of others, but also of ourselves—is the tip of the iceberg. Therefore, we might withhold judgement, lay aside our unfounded fears and, with gracious curiosity, seek to know more. We must be prepared, always, for change—change in perspective, yes, but especially a change of heart. For this is the gift the other offers to us—the experience of forgiveness and growth in understanding, compassion and love.