

There's a story about a lady who went into an ice cream shop in Beverly Hills, to buy an ice cream cone. She was shocked when Paul Newman walked in and stood right behind her. Although rattled, she was determined to maintain her composure. She paid for her ice cream cone, then confidently walked out. Outside, she realized she didn't have her cone. Not wanting to look foolish, she waited a few minutes before re-entering the store. When she didn't find her ice cream cone at the counter, she paused to contemplate where it could be. A soft tap on the shoulder interrupted her thoughts. She turned to find herself face to face with Paul Newman. He politely suggested that if she was looking for her ice cream cone, she might look in her purse. When Paul Newman showed up he had an amazing impact on that lady. Famous people tend to have an impact on us.

What about Jesus, the Son of God? When Jesus shows up will he have an impact on our lives.

Today's gospel begins in an atmosphere of fear. It is Easter Sunday, two days after the death of Jesus. It is most likely that the disciples continued to meet in the upper room where the Last Supper had been held. But they met in something very like terror. They knew the poisonous bitterness of the Jews who had schemed to bring about the death of Jesus, and they were afraid they would be next. So they were meeting in terror, listening fearfully for every step on the stair and for every knock at the door, lest the agents of the Sanhedrin should come to arrest them too.

Suddenly, there is Jesus standing in their midst. The very fact that he can be present in spite of the locked doors indicates that he is not the same as before, that he is present in a new way. "Peace with you!" is his greeting. It is the normal Jewish greeting of "Shalom". But, coming from Jesus, the Prince of Peace, to this group of frightened people, it has special meaning – where Jesus is truly present to us, there is peace.

He shows them his hands and side. He is not just a disembodied ghost but the same Jesus who died on the cross – and yet there are differences. The disciples' fear is gradually transformed into an unspeakable joy at the return of their Master. He continues to speak to them. Repeating his greeting of peace, he proceeds to give them their mission. There is no word of criticism for their failure to stand by him in his final moments. "As the Father sent me, so am I sending you." Then he breathed on them, the breath of the Spirit, the Spirit of the Father and of the Son: "Receive the Holy Spirit."

There is no doubt that, when John spoke in this way, he was thinking back to the old story of the creation of man. There the writer says: "And the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). This was the same picture as Ezekiel saw in the valley of dead, dry bones, when he heard God say to the wind: "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breath upon these slain that they may live" (Ezekiel 37:9). The coming of the Holy Spirit is like the waking of life from the dead. When he comes upon the Church she is recreated for her task.

Jesus said that as God had sent him forth, so he sent them forth; this means three things.

Firstly, it means that Jesus needs the Church which is exactly what Paul meant when he called the Church "the body of Christ" in Ephesians 1:23. Jesus had come with a message for all men and now he was going back to his Father. His message will never be taken to all men, unless we the Church take it. The Church is to be a mouth to speak for Jesus, feet to run his errands, hands to do his work. Therefore, the first thing this means is that Jesus is dependent on his Church.

Secondly, it means that the Church needs Jesus. Anyone who is to be sent out needs someone to send them; they need a message to take; they need a power and an authority to back this message; they need someone to whom they can turn when in doubt and in difficulty. Without Jesus, the Church has no message; without him she has no power; without him she has no one to turn to when up against it. This means that the Church is dependent on Jesus.

Thirdly, the sending out of the Church by Jesus is parallel to the sending out of Jesus by God. But no one can read the story of the Fourth Gospel without seeing that the relationship between Jesus and God was continually dependent on Jesus' perfect obedience and perfect love. Jesus could be God's messenger only because he gave to God that perfect obedience and love. It follows that the Church is fit to be the messenger and the instrument of Christ only when she perfectly loves him and perfectly obeys him. The Church must never be out to spread her own message; she must be out to spread the message of Christ. She must never be out to follow man-made policies; she must be out to follow the will of Christ.

Then Jesus gave the disciples the commission which the Church must never forget: “For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained.” Is that all he gave them to do? It does not seem much. What about all the other things the Gospel talks about? And yet, it is all there in those words.

There is no full forgiveness of sin without reconciliation. Their task is to bring about the reconciliation of all with their God, with their brothers and sisters and with the whole of creation. That is their primary mission, to which all their other efforts and teaching will be subordinated. To restore right relationships between God and his people and among the people themselves. That is a pretty big programme.

In practice, it involves a lot more than just saying words of forgiveness. It involves much more than “going to confession” and being absolved by a priest. It involves working to create a whole society based on right relationships with God, between people and with the rest of the creation. It is the making of the Kingdom of God. That is a pretty big programme. And, of course, their mission is also ours. The words of Jesus spoken to them are also spoken to us. How will we respond? In Jesus’ name. Amen.