

Second Sunday of the Easter season 2020
Jesus came and stood in the midst of them and said Peace be With You.
Interstices

One of the occupational hazards of working in tertiary education is that you can easily lapse into feeling you need to use big words, and even actually enjoying them. One of my favourite big fancy words is ***interstices***. It's a rich word for the spaces between things. You could even say it is a fancy word for gaps. It's roots in Latin literally mean "standing between", so you'll see why it springs to my mind today with our gospel story, and the line -

Jesus came and stood in the midst of them and said Peace be With You.

It also reminds me of a prayer I learnt when I was in primary school, taught by the ancient Presbyterian minister from the church my mother took me to. His name was Dr William Cuming Thom, and he'd been a Professor of Old Testament at the Presbyterian Theological Hall in Sydney, and came to our congregation in Haberfield after that. He seemed very venerable indeed, with white hair and a deep Scottish accent, but he really must have been only a few years older than I am now. Anyway he taught us a prayer in our RE classes at school that we always prayed together at the end of the class. I now know it comes from the story of Jacob in the book of Genesis, but I didn't then. It goes like this: *May the Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent one from another. Amen.*

In one way that might be all we need to learn today, this prayer of Dr Thom, for in the gaps between us, in our interstices, we need to feel a sense of connection and community, and this prayer speaks into that space deep within us (or maybe actually not very far from the surface!) for keeping connected with each other: *May the Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent one from another. Amen.*

But more than that, this is what Jesus is doing in the gospel story. He appears to the disciples on the first Easter Day, while they were in the house behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. We too are behind closed doors, in our own lockdown, not for fear of the Jews, but still for very fear of what might kill us. Into that space the risen Jesus appears in their midst and says *Peace be with you.*

That's an important message to us. In the midst of us, in the threatening spaces in between, the risen Jesus is present, watching between me and thee while we are absent one from another. This speaks to the possibility of the spaces between as something other than spaces of absence and isolation, but as space where there is a different kind of presence.

This different kind of presence isn't an easy one, of course. Those who are teaching and learning by distance education of one sort or another will know how tiring it is and how much more work it is to establish and maintain the presence, the community of learning that is involved. I hope your internet connections are in good shape right now, and you can hear and see us well in this live stream. How blessed we are to have this means of connection at a distance. And of course those of us who are finding our work is dominated by Zoom meetings know it isn't easy. But still, *May the Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent one from another. Amen.*

So in these spaces in between us, and in the *in between space* in which we live, let's hear the word which Jesus speaks to us. **Peace**. It is of course the great Jewish greeting ***Shalom***. Peace is a rich and deep word, but the Jewish word Shalom is richer and deeper still.

The peace of which Shalom speaks is not just about the absence of conflict, but is a rich concept that opens up vistas of healing and prosperity and reconciliation. It's a **social** word not just an **individual** word, and it's a greeting that wishes not just good stuff for **you (singular)**, but

connection between you and others with the mutual benefit and flourishing that comes from social and interpersonal peace.

Here's what one scholar says about what Shalom means in the Old Testament:

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call shalom. We call it peace but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness and delight – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.¹

That's what the Risen Jesus is wishing his disciples: Shalom. Peace, wholeness, flourishing, connection, well-being, delight, fulfillment. Being as we ought to be.

Yes Jesus, as you stand in the interstices, in the spaces in between us, and in our *in between space*, give us that Shalom now for we need it so much. Give us peace, wholeness, flourishing, connection, well-being, delight, fulfillment. Speak the word again to us now and give us Shalom.

But there's one more thing that the gospel reading is telling us.

This story is set on the first day of the week, and when Jesus is standing there in the space between them, in the interstices, he breathes on them, and says Receive Holy Spirit. This is a significant echo of the Genesis story, of the very first day of all weeks, when in the chaos before all things the Spirit, the breath of God was breathed over the waters of chaos to begin the work of creation, the making of all things. Here once again, the breath of God is breathed into the chaos of those disciples behind locked doors. This is the creating and creative Word of God saying Shalom: peace, wholeness, fulfillment, flourishing, connection, well-being. This is nothing short of the First Day of God's New Creation. The First Day of Resurrection life.

OK. So here we are in our *in between spaces*, longing for some of that, and feeling a bit bereft in the absences of those in between spaces. We want more Shalom, thank you very much. But the thing about Jesus and his ministry and his risen life, is that it is a beginning not an end. It is also a preview of what is ahead for us. We might not have enough Shalom for now, but this story and the whole story of Jesus shows what is in store for all of us when all things are brought to their conclusion. It will be Shalom. It will be peace, wholeness, flourishing, connection, well-being, delight, fulfillment. Completely and perfectly, world without end amen.

So there is for us another *in between space* in which we stand; the space in between the First day of God's new creation of Shalom in Jesus, and the completion of that new creation in the ages of ages, the perfection of the Shalom of Jesus' risen life. It's the space in between salvation begun and salvation completed.

So in all the in between spaces, our prayer is that simple and profound prayer I learn long ago:

May the Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent one from another. Amen.

¹ [Cornelius Plantinga](#) *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*,