

“Peace be with you!”

“That Sunday evening the doors had been locked where the disciples were, because they were afraid of the Jews. Then Jesus came, stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you!”” (John 20:19). Then, He showed them His hands and side. Remember how Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, and not on a warhorse? By that, He demonstrated His great humility and love for us. Here, Jesus came and stood in the midst of His cowering disciples, and His first words to them weren’t, “I told you so,” but, *“Peace be with you!”* He didn’t speak to them a word of condemnation, a word of Law, but Gospel. *“Peace be with you!”* And, with this, Jesus spoke of peace the world cannot give.

That peace, which the world cannot give, is the forgiveness of sins. This is the whole reason Jesus died, the reason why He became flesh – to win for us the forgiveness of sins. When He said “peace” to the disciples, it was as if He said to them, “You are forgiven.” He did what He came to do. They are forgiven. They need not fear, not fear neither sin, death, or hell. Instead, they can be at peace. Their Lord, and our Lord, has risen from the dead. As proof, He showed them His hands and side. He is the same Jesus they saw crucified, not a ghost or other such thing. Then, having received the peace the world can’t give, St. John writes, “The disciples were glad when they saw the Lord” (John 20:20).

The peace that the world can’t give, which God alone gives through Christ, is the assurance and confidence that our sins are forgiven. Every sin that we have committed – and which we have yet to commit – finds its atonement in Christ’s passion. By His wounds, we are healed. By His wounds and by His rising again, we have peace. And that’s something the world can’t give us. We have the glad confidence of the forgiveness of sins and the joyful hope of the resurrection to eternal life. And, not only does Christ give us peace, which the world cannot, but He also gives it in a different way than the world gives its sort of peace.

St. John writes, *“Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Me, I also am sending you.” After He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit! If you forgive any people’s sins, they have been forgiven; if you retain any people’s sins, they have been retained”* (John 20:21-23).

With these words, Jesus instituted the Office of the Holy Ministry and entrusted to it the responsibility of speaking publicly, in His stead, for the forgiveness of sins. The Apostles and our pastors today speak forth the forgiveness of Christ. When they speak within their office, such as in the Divine Service or in private confession and absolution, that our sins are forgiven and that we may depart in peace – they truly are, and we truly can. This is totally different than how the world works. In the world, if we want peace, we have to make it. Christ won us a peace the world can’t, and He gives it in a way the world won’t: freely. He gives forgiveness to us freely through His Sacraments, through the Means of Grace, and He constantly reassures us by sending pastors to speak His forgiveness in His stead.

This authority to forgive sins in the stead of Christ, what we know from the Catechism as the Office of the Keys, isn’t the sole property of the pastoral office, but it is given by Christ to His Church. Jesus teaches us this in Matthew 18, where the authority to bind and loose sins is given to the congregation as a whole. The pastor is called to speak publicly in the stead of Christ and on behalf of the congregation. In our personal lives, however, when our neighbour sins against us – or we, them – and the words of Christ’s forgiveness are spoken, at that moment, sins are truly forgiven. When we forgive our Christian friend because Christ forgives us or they assure us that we are forgiven because of Christ, that is true and valid in heaven, and that gives us peace, too. This means that God is not up in the sky looking to smite us but looks down upon us in love and smiles upon us.

By His resurrection, Christ brings us peace the world cannot give. In Him, the sins which formerly would’ve seen us eternally condemned in hell are forgiven. By Him our bodies will be raised anew and we shall live in eternal joy – and that is something the world can’t give.