

When Lucy and I were “an item”, in our early 20’s we both were members of St Oswald’s church in Durham, in the north of England. We were both servers at the church. One Sunday we were in the service together, both robed. But there was an icy wall of pain between us. I cannot now remember what it was about, but there had been a painful rift in our affection, and just being in the same building was agony.

Then came “the Peace”. There was no way we could continue, in the small sanctuary, to avoid each other. I walked towards her and experienced, in those few steps, something miraculous. I felt the hurt and the pain and the disappointment, and the guilt and the sickness in my stomach...I felt them all wash away. We met with hands and eyes. “Peace be with you!” suddenly meant so much more than I had ever previously understood.

The way our services work is a planned and thought-out way. It is a theological plan! You stumble out of bed and make yourself presentable and get to church. There’s a nice hymn to start us off and some opening prayers. Then we hear readings from “Holy Scripture”. If you are listening with the “ears of your heart” you may find yourself moved by the readings or the sermon that unpacks and applies them to our lives. You may, and I hope you do, find that the Spirit is speaking to you. Speaking, even if quietly!

When the Spirit speaks I think there is always a desire to move us along, just a step or two further, towards Christ-likeness. “Christians” are so called because we are little Christs, bearers of Christ in our lives. When you compare yourself with who God is calling you to be it can be uncomfortable. You realize how you have failed to move forward, or how you have slipped backwards. You become aware of how you have disappointed God. Sometimes it is on small and private ways. Other times it is in very clear and specific ways.

For me, with Lucy, I was painfully aware of love broken. It was a mistake made. It was a rip, an ugly gash. It was something I did not feel proud of before God.

This is the place where the church has wisely placed the prayer of confession. As we say these words, too often without paying attention to them, the words are trying to give us a place to bring to God the broken, jagged, un-good, un-Christ-like parts of our lives. I don’t remember the prayer of confession but I remember how the pain rose up sharp and aching in me.

Then, when the priest tells you that you are forgiven, there comes “the Peace”.

But just pause to think about forgiveness.

The priest asks God to have mercy on you. Because when you are tangled in mistakes, selfishness, failures, shame, laziness, stupidity whatever it is that you have come to realize, what you need most is mercy. You don’t need judgment! or a lecture! You need mercy.

God is asked to pardon you, that is not hold it against you.

God is asked to deliver you, because you cannot get out of this mess by yourself.

God is asked to confirm and strengthen you in all goodness because you actually *are* basically good and Christ-like.

And God is asked to keep you in eternal life, that is life in his presence, that secret inner life you live in him through Jesus.

God doesn’t say, “Yeah, don’t worry about it”.

God says, “Listen! I will help you.”

For me, in that moment with Lucy, I could not get out of the mess I was in. I could not think of a way out. I could not imagine what I could do or say "to make it better". I was stuck. Stupidity, youthfulness, pride, fear. All of these, and more, were part of who I was, (and still am).

The image that comes to me is that the only way out of that mess was for me to collapse, disappear, and then magically return, having erased that bit of our history. But you can't do that. Actually what that sounds like is dying.

I think the "something miraculous" was being carried with Jesus into death and then brought back in resurrection. Wow, that sounds very theological! And it is. We say this stuff in the creed, "we believe in the resurrection of the dead..." But the resurrection is part of Christ-likeness. It is because Christ died and rose again that people like me can miraculously get out of the mess I had got trapped in. I was dying inside that day in church. I can still remember the feeling. It was as if Jesus sucked me into whatever happened on the cross and wooshed me out of the grave, all in an instant. Beats me how it works, but I know I was reborn in love with Lucy at the Peace.

Now I am talking about a BIG EVENT and mostly those don't happen every week. But the Peace is about being reconciled. Reconciled means brought back into balance, into good relationship, into harmony, into community. It is about having your inner peace restored because you are no longer in conflict. It is about having your relationships restored by making peace where there has been tension. It is about coming into the community of faith when you have been on the outside for a while, looking in or on. It is about putting down the things that have made you uncomfortable with your heavenly Father.

I want to say two non-magical things about this magical-feeling thing.

I cannot swim a mile. But if I launch out into a fast moving current, I can go a mile in water pretty fast. You cannot make reconciliation happen. But you can get on board the bus of Christ's reconciliation. In Christ, God has already forgiven you. Your job is to take hold of that gift and feel it as you are flown along into peace.

The other non-magical thing is that it is not going to get done *for* you. It is like the wall is down, or the door has been opened for you, but *you* still have to walk through. God makes it possible, but you are free, and therefore, as grown-ups, you need to take hold of your end, the light end, and act.

So the Peace is your chance to act.

Now here I am challenged. I tend to walk about greeting whoever is in front of me. And that is largely OK. But I want to put something to you here about real peace, real reconciliation, really taking your end of the work of bringing peace that Jesus has already done for you.

The peace is **not** a chance to say "Hi" to your buddies! No! You are at peace with your buddies.

This is the time to seek out those you are not at peace with! If you are in a low-level dislike with someone, don't miss this chance to fix it! If you have never touched someone here before NOW is your chance to open relationship. If you have seen a person you have never spoken to, because they came from that "other" church, get yourself over to them! How can we be a reconciled community if all we use the Peace for is for tightening our little circles? The Peace is laid on in Church, but it is also costly. Hold that hand! Look into that eye! Say it with feeling!

If you are not at peace with someone...then *"Leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way.*

First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:24)

Guess what! The next thing we do in Church is *the offering*, brought up to the altar.

Confession and Forgiveness and the Peace together make up the "rite of reconciliation" in our service. Use them. They are a gift paid for on a cross. They are for joy and salvation.