

Ascension to Pentecost 9



'The doors... were locked for fear' John 20.19

It's only in Acts that we find the fifty-day spacing between the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In John's gospel, both take place as different elements of the first Easter Day and in this panel from his famous altarpiece in Siena Cathedral, Duccio captures the very moment Jesus appears to his disciples on the evening of that day (John 20.19-23).

They are in a house in Jerusalem, the doors of which, John tells us, "were locked for fear of the Jews". Just two days after Jesus had been executed for treason, rumours of resurrection were gathering pace and the city was on high alert, its officials hostile and cagey. A door stands centrally in the painting and Duccio paints a stout horizontal beam across it, underlining not just the depth of the disciples' anxiety but also the impossibility of normal entry. Duccio positions Jesus against this door and cross-bar in a way which makes it impossible not to think again of crucifixion. But if we miss the artist's nudge in that direction, we have only to look at Jesus' feet. Risen he may be, but still wounded. The disciples converge on him from either side, amazed, full of questions, sorely in need of that 'Shalom', that 'Peace', which is his greeting.

What do we see as we gaze at the painting in the context of coronavirus?

We see emotions very familiar during a pandemic. We see the sort of fear which isolates and separates. We see a longing for reassurance and peace and, as if to emphasise the depth of their trauma, John tells us that Jesus said "Peace be with you" to his friends not once but twice.

We also see a crucified and risen Christ who knows no boundaries, whose presence fills this whole wide world as well as the homes of those quaking behind closed doors. He longs to share his Shalom with us. Lockdown or no lockdown, he is present.

"The Holy Spirit is that power which opens eyes that are closed, hearts that are unaware and minds that shrink from too much reality."

John V Taylor

Prayer

Crucified and risen Christ,
when life is locked down
and fear fastens the latch,
slip into our midst
and bring us your peace. Amen