

“Peace be with you.” Since ancient times, this phrase was a common way for Hebrews to both greet each other and say goodbye. “Shalom aleichem.” Peace be with you. Which was responded to with “Aleichem shalom.” And upon you be peace. Even today, you will be greeted in Israel with a kindly “shalom.” As Catholics, we have retained this beautiful greeting in our liturgies, but often we hear it without allowing those words of peace to penetrate our hearts.

These simple words feature prominently in today’s Gospel. After Jesus’ death, the disciples were huddled together behind locked doors out of fear that they too might suffer death. In the midst of this fear, Jesus appeared to them saying, “Peace be with you.” This was not used as a mere empty platitude, but instead as a true invitation to peace. Then, He proved this by showing them His wounds, revealing that they no longer needed to fear death.

A week later, the disciples were gathered once again behind locked doors, this time with Thomas present. Again, Jesus appeared in their midst saying, “Peace be with you.” While this was an invitation to be freed from the fears that kept them locked up and bound in hiding, it was also something deeper. It was also an invitation to be freed from their doubts. For this reason, Jesus showed Thomas His wounds so that all doubts could be put to rest. As we know from our first reading, the Apostles were all freed from their fears and went out preaching boldly among the people.

In our second reading, we encounter the Apostle John many years later after he had been imprisoned on the island of Patmos. While there, Jesus appeared to him saying, “Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, the one who lives. Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever. I hold the keys to death and the netherworld.” Yet again, John received a message of peace. You do not need to be afraid of imprisonment or death because I am still here with you and will not leave you until the end of your days.

Within this context, I find it interesting to reflect on the different times in the mass when we receive this invitation to peace. At the very beginning of the mass, immediately after the sign of the Cross, bishops greet us with the words “peace be with you” while priests use the expression “the Lord be with you” or some other equivalent phrase. Just as Christ once appeared to the disciples offering them peace, Christ is revealed to us in the person of the celebrant who offers the peace of Christ to all who are present. His peace invites us to leave the fears and distractions of the world behind so that we can enter into the celebration of the mass more fully.

When it comes time to proclaim the Gospel, we hear once again “the Lord be with you.” We are invited to set aside our cares and concerns and accept the Lord’s peace so that we can hear His Word with open minds and open hearts, so that God’s word can penetrate more deeply within us. Later at the start of the Eucharistic prayer, we hear yet again “the Lord be with you.” Then, after the consecration of the Eucharist, the Lord’s peace is extended to us before we receive Him in the form of Bread and Wine.

Again and again we are invited to set aside our fears and doubts so that we can plunge more deeply into the mystery of the Eucharist and encounter Christ’s peace in our hearts. To put it more simply, Christ’s peace invites us to encounter Him within His Word and Sacraments so that we can respond to His invitation without fear. Finally, we are extended Christ’s peace one last time at the end of the mass before we are sent back out into the world so that we can live out our faith in the world boldly without fear.

This helps us to realize that Christ’s invitation to peace is not limited to the mass alone but is rather something meant for our entire lives. Think about how often we come to mass a true mess, frazzled and distracted. Despite this, Christ continues

to come to us in the mass offering us His peace in the midst of the mess of our day. In the same way, Christ also comes to us in the midst of the mess of our daily lives.

We don't always believe this, however. Sometimes we feel like we have to have it all together if we want to be able to encounter Christ in our lives. So we hide from Him in shame, locked in the midst of the darkness of our sins just as the disciples once locked themselves in that Upper Room. Christ, however, is not ashamed of us. Christ is not ashamed of our sins. Christ is not ashamed of our doubts or fears. He offered Himself for us willingly so that He could be with us in the midst of the mess of our lives, be with us in the midst of the mess of our sins and doubts and fears.

The only thing that Christ cannot enter is a locked human heart. Except for this, there is no darkness that He cannot pierce to bring us His peace. This peace is greater than any sin or sorrow, greater than any suffering or shame that we could ever face. He wants to break every single chain that binds us, but He can only do this if we are brave enough to trust Him and accept His peace.

So He gently stands outside our closed human hearts, offering us His peace, asking to be let in. Then, much as He once did with the Apostles, He shows us His wounds. He shows us the depths of His love and that those wounds of mercy are still open wide. He shows us that the blood and water which once flowed from His pierced Heart upon the Cross are still flowing even now, an eternal font of mercy flowing freely for all those who wish to call upon His name.

Jesus is the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, and His peace is offered to us from the moment of our first breath in this world until the moment when we are called to our eternal home. One day, we must trust Jesus enough to accept His peace fully into our own lives so that we too might be transformed into fearless Catholics who boldly offer Christ's peace to everyone we meet. "Peace be with you."