

Beginning today and for the next few weeks, our sermons are going to be focusing on the epistles, the book of Romans, which runs now for a few weeks until Saint James' Day. And the book of Romans is a great book. It's Paul's Magnum Opus. It's the nearest he gets to writing systematically as he writes to the church in Rome, not a place that he visited, we don't think, but a church with whom he wanted to clearly set out his stall. It's a dense book. If you don't believe me, just look at the reading that we had today from chapter five. There's many rich themes there. In just eight verses, he manages to mention justification, faith, peace, access, grace, hope, glory. In fact, that's just the first four verses. And any of those things deserve a sermon or two. I'm not going to cover them all, but I am going to pick out three, three of those words that Paul mentions in the reading, which seemed to me to resonate, particularly with the times in which we're living.

The first word is peace, which isn't the first word of the passage that we had set. The first word of the passage is therefore, which reminds us that we're jumping in, not quite in the middle point of the letter, but certainly, a good way into what Paul is writing. Therefore, he says, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through Jesus Christ. Paul spent the previous four chapters before where this reading starts making it clear that without Jesus Christ, we don't enjoy peace with God. Paul's message is that our natural state is to be estranged from God, our creator. He says in verse 11 of this chapter, through Jesus Christ, we have now received reconciliation. St. Paul understood the work of Jesus Christ, his life, his ministry, his death, and resurrection as all about winning our reconciliation, reconciling us to God. Where there was once estrangement caused by sin, because of what Jesus has done for us, we can enjoy peace with God.

And this gets at the heart of what the Bible's understanding of peace is all about. The Hebrew word is shalom. And the Bible has much to say about shalom. Shalom, the Hebrew word for peace, is not simply the absence of war. The literal

translation is to be complete. It's a rich and positive word that speaks of wholeness, harmony, and above all, right relationships. The peace that we seek in our nation, in our communities is also about right relationships. As Christian people, we continue to pursue shalom. And this peace is not simply the absence of strife. It's not merely a return to the status quo as what we think of as normal, many people have been reminding us was not just. There was no shalom. As things move forward, let's not be satisfied seeking a return to what was merely normal. Let's seek to build a peace which speaks of God's shalom.

The second word I'll draw out from Paul's letter is this, access. He writes, through Jesus we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand. And Paul's using a technical word here, a Greek word, *prosagoge*, which is a word that was used to usher someone into the presence of royalty. That's what the word means. I don't want to disappoint anyone who's watching here, but next time you go to London, if you go up to Buckingham Palace and talk to the person on security and say, "I'd like to see the queen," you'd be disappointed. They won't let you through. But if you know one of the queen's courtiers, one of her ladies in waiting, then you could ask them to take you through security. Take you to see the queen. Who knows? She might offer you a cup of tea.

It's a powerful image of what Jesus has done for us left to our own devices. The Bible is clear, we can't make our own way to God. But if we are justified, if we accept the gift of faith, Jesus leads us into the very presence of God. We who are estranged from God can be reconciled to God. The relationship with our Creator can be restored. We can enjoy shalom with God. And notice too that Paul says after we have obtained access into God's presence, we can stand. We don't need to come before God groveling. We can stand because in Christ Jesus, we are restored. We are renewed.

And Paul's ministry was driven by the conviction that this access to God, this coming into God's presence is something that God offers to everyone

in Christ Jesus. And there were those in the church at the time, we can see in Paul's writings, there were those who thought that this message was for the Jews only, but it was at the core of Saint Paul's belief that the Gentiles were not to be excluded. Paul was adamant that it was for all, Jew and Gentile alike, that in Christ, everyone had equal access to God. He said, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slaves or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

And what's true in the spiritual realm must also be true in our communities. We who are blessed with access to God must stand up for those who don't have equal access to the privileges that we enjoy. Recent events have caused me to reflect on white privilege, on that privilege that I have enjoyed. And if I was to sum up that privilege in a sentence, I'd say that it was all about access. I've benefited over the years from access to good schools, good education, good places. I've felt as if I could go anywhere and stand as if I belong.

Our brown and black brothers and sisters do not feel that. Their access to good schools, good jobs, good health has been impeded. It's time for that to change. And I recognize that I'm not sure what I can do to bring about that change. My first step is to stop and to reflect on my own privilege and listen to the stories of others, which is why I'm committing to be part of a Sacred Ground group that we're getting going here at St. James. The details are on the website. And that's a demanding course produced by the Episcopal Church to help white people talk about race. And I hope that many of you will join me in that endeavor.

The third and final word that I'll pick out is hope. The hope of which St. Paul speaks is no mere optimism. It's not a naive belief that everything will be okay in the end. He says this, suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope. Hope springs out of suffering. It is forged in life's battles. And just as the word peace can have its true meaning hollowed out, so hope can be similarly watered

down. But we are to remain a people of hope, not a people of wishful thinking, but a people who have hope planted deep in their soul. A hope that is nurtured deep within us as we go through life's travails.

We hope for a kingdom where God will one day dwell with his people, where he will wipe away every tear from their eyes where death will be no more. Our hope inspires us to seek that kingdom now. We're called to be a people who work for the building of God's kingdom so that all people can dwell in shalom. It was this hope that inspired Dr. King to say, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. So may we live our lives as people of hope who pursue God's shalom for ourselves and for all God's people. Amen.