

**SERMON PREACHED AT ST ANDREW'S WALKERVILLE ON SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 10,
2017 BY THE REVEREND STUART LANGSHAW, LOCUM TENENS.**

ELEVENTH SERMON IN THE SERIES ABOUT HOLY COMMUNION

There are so many ways to say, "G'day there. How're you doing?" There's the slap on the back; the punch on the arm; the wave from a little distance away. The Maoris have their nose to nose rub; the people of the Indian subcontinent have their hands in the greeting position; the people of the Far East have their bow, people in the Arabic speaking world have their upwards hand roll. In our culture we acknowledge people with a nod of the head, or touch another person's arm below the elbow or shake hands. All these are gestures and actions that communicate a contact ... a greeting.

However, the GREETING OF PEACE in our Communion Service is not a greeting as such at all. There is a great deal going on behind the words and behind the actions.

Look at where the Greeting of Peace is located in our service. It's not right at the start, as it would be if it was a "G'day there. How're you doing?" sort of greeting. It's located directly after the Confession and Absolution, and immediately before the Communion. Also, it's good to notice that it's not called "The Greeting." It's called "The Greeting of Peace." We need to unpack what's going on so that we can be informed and careful in our taking part in the service.

The brief part of our service we call "The Greeting of Peace" begins with a theological announcement. "We are the body of Christ." Sometimes that gets lost in the anticipation of the greeting. "We are the body of Christ." We have just been bound together in our common words of confession, and in hearing the declaration that we are forgiven through the love and mercy of God.

We are the body of Christ, bound together in being a fellowship of the forgiven. We are the body of Christ – confessed, cleansed, conjoined in our common belonging to Christ. Here, now, in St Andrew's Walkerville, the theological truth set out in the New Testament comes true – we are the Body of Christ. We may be individual human beings – but here, now, together, we have a new identity – we are the Body of Christ.

And not only that – but also, "Christ's Spirit is with us." That's an amazing, wonderful, heart-warming, life enriching truth. In this moment of fellowship – we know, we KNOW – that Christ's spirit is with us. It's not just words, it's a lived experience. We feel that spirit of Christ in our forgiveness. We feel it in our "Body-of-Christ-ness."

And because of all that, we can share the Lord's peace with each other in a real way.

Peace ... Shalom (שלום) ... was a common greeting in the Old Testament world. "Peace" was also the greeting the angels gave as they announced the birth of Jesus ("Glory to God in the highest and peace to God's people on earth." Luke 2:14) After his resurrection the risen Christ greeted his disciples with "Peace be with you." (John 20:19). The oldest document in the New Testament is probably St Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, and it starts with the words, "Grace and peace to you." (1 Thessalonians 1:1). Peter, Jude and the Book of Revelation all begin with the Greeting of Peace. (1 Peter 1:2. Jude 2. Revelation 1:4). The Greek word of "Peace" is eirene (εἰρηνη). So every person whose name is Irene has been named "peace."

This peace ... this shalom has many meanings. Peace between nations. Peace between humans in our relationship together. Peace means that I want, and I need, my friendship with you to be real and genuine. Peace means that we seek the very best welfare for those we greet. We have received peace from God ... we now share peace with you. Peace means that we wish the other person safety – a quiet, restful state of mind – wholeness – a life where things are as they should be. To greet one another in peace and with peace is an act of faith, and it should compel us to make that peace more real among us.

Our Christian peace is not because we happen to be meeting here as a group of friends, or because we play Bridge together, or that we're in Rotary together. We are together as brothers and sisters in worship, because of Christ and through our commitment to Christ, and through Christ's commitment to each one of us.

Sometimes "Peace" is the most important and significant thing we can say to another person in Church, due to their life's circumstances. We never know what joys or what burdens people bring to Church with them. To be able to touch them in a hand-shake and to say "Peace be with you" can be a most significant ministry to them, even though we have no idea about their joys or burdens.

Passing the peace is a *sort* of greeting, on a human level. But it is more ... it is a priestly blessing that we offer each other. "Peace be with you" is a blessing we pronounce in the name of Jesus, risen from the dead. In pronouncing peace upon each other, in effect we are praying for each other. We are asking God to give peace in all its fullness to our friends in Christ here at Church with us. "Peace be with you" is our prayer that in the people's lives whom we greet, the circumstances may be coloured by God's peace. We can't remove the strains and the stresses that they feel, and we can't cancel the upset in their lives. But we can bring the colour of God's peace to bear on them. I know that this morning at our service, some of us are feeling emptiness of heart because of the death of a dearly loved friend. I know that others feel concerned and uncertain because of the very delicate medical condition of another friend. To those people we say, "Peace be with you." It's not a hearty slap on the back ... it is a heart-felt blessing and prayer for them in their circumstances.

While it is right that we want God's peace for every person with us in church today, we don't have to go to each and every worshipper. There are no prizes for the person who greets the largest number of worshippers. In fact, to greet just a few people with a heart-felt, significant "Peace be with you" is by far the better way to go than a rush to try to get to everyone superficially.

In our Communion service, how can we presume to bless others with the blessing of peace and a prayer for peace? It's because we are the body of Christ. How do we know that we are the Body of Christ? Because "His Spirit is with us." It is as that Body of Christ ... it is as that peace giver ... that we come together to worship our loving God. It is as members of that Body of Christ and as peace-givers, that we come to the Communion rail to receive the Holy Communion, and then we go back into the work-a-day world to share the Spirit of God and the peace of God with everyone we meet.

May I greet you? **"We are the Body of Christ."** *"His Spirit is with us."*
"The peace of the Lord be always with you." *"And also with you."*