

Recently I have had to fill out an application form for a new passport. As I was filling it out, my mind went back to the time I applied for my first passport. I was due to take part in a school trip. It was to be my first trip abroad and so I needed a passport. On that occasion I recall they asked not only for details of name, address and date of birth, but also details of hair colour, the colour of your eyes, your height and also for details of any distinguishing marks such as scars or birth marks.

These distinguishing marks were, I suppose, things that marked us out as individuals. Then of course there are our fingerprints, those combinations of whirls and lines on the tips of our fingers that are unique to us as individuals. In this high tech age, the lowly fingerprint has been joined by what has become known as genetic fingerprinting, based on the complex DNA molecule, present in each cell of our bodies, that again is unique to each one of us.

The colour of our hair, our eyes, any birth marks or scars, our fingerprints and our DNA are distinguishing characteristics. But they are physical signs – they do not give any information about our personalities, about the sort of people we are.

In our Gospel reading this morning, St John tells us of that first meeting of the disciples with the risen Lord in the Upper Room on that first Easter Day as well as that second meeting a week later. When he comes among them in the midst of their fear and uncertainty, Jesus shows them his hands and his side, his distinguishing marks. But unlike our own distinguishing marks, these marks of his passion are not just marks of his identity, they are also marks of his

personality, as one who gave himself. The risen Christ who meets with his disciples is the Christ who was crucified. The Christ we come to in prayer for ourselves and for others is the Risen and Crucified Christ. He offers to us, as he did to his disciples, the comfort of one who knows, really knows, in his own person what suffering is all about and who has overcome it in himself.

The awful suffering in the trenches of the First World War influenced not just the social and political philosophy of many who went through this terrible experience but also the theology of many. After that war, the poet Edward Shilto wrote a poem, 'Jesus of the Scars' in which he reflected on how the Cross of Jesus speaks creatively and redemptively to a suffering world shattered by war.

If we had never sought, we seek thee now;
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
We must have sight of thorn pricks on thy brow,
We must have thee, O Jesus of the Scars.

The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;
In all the universe we have no place.
Our wounds are hurting us; where is thy balm?
Lord Jesus by thy Scars, we claim thy grace.

If when the doors are shut, thou drawest near,
Only reveal those hands, that side of thine;
We know today what wounds are, have no fear,
Show us thy Scars, we know the countersign.

The other gods were strong; but thou wast weak;
They rode, but thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
and not a god has wounds, but thou alone.

A God, in whose perfect being pain has a place, is a God who can speak to this broken and hurting world, a God who can hold our worship. For the peace he offered the disciples that night, the peace he offers us, is not an easy, shallow peace. It is a peace that strikes at the heart of the discord in the heart and soul of man. A peace that addresses the basic problem of sin, that basic attitude in man that separates him from God; a peace that shines through the darkness of suffering and grief. A peace, obtained at a cost, that has left its mark on the Son of God.

But now the task is done, the battle fought, the victory won. So the Risen, Crucified Jesus comes to the disciples in their confusion, to Thomas in his doubts and gives them his peace. In the confusion and uncertainty of life, in the doubts that life leaves us, may he come to us, whose hands and side were pierced for our sake. In him may we find our peace. Not necessarily a peace in which all our questions and doubts were answered – for that may not be available – but a peace in which we face them secure in the knowledge that we are not alone; that he, Jesus of the Scars, is with us, strengthening us, holding us, loving us.