

Graham Stacey: Peace be with you...

I am fairly sure I struggled with eye contact as a child, as a teenager and probably as a young adult. Not that I remember much of any of those seasons of life! As a child most of my eye contact was with the TV screen. 'You'll get square eyes!'; was a common phrase in my family. As a teenager most of my eye contact was with a computer screen and as a young adult most of my eye contact was with... well lets say some would have thought it was healthy!

I reckon along the way I was told that eye contact was a 'good' thing and perhaps it was even encouraged. Now I know it is good, giving both value and meaning to conversations and showing that you may even be listening. But more than that, it shows meaning and value to the person with whom your eyes have contacted and fills the action, whether conversation or hand-shake or even just a 'Hello' with purpose, intention and, dare I say, emotion.

As one who has had to learn eye contact in later life and indeed still struggles with it, it seems harsh that I should be pointing out the lack of eye contact in one of the defining moments of the life of a community of believers.

"The peace of the Lord be with you." "And also with you." Comes the reply and then begins an exercise that for some is filled with military precision. Most are focused on picking a route through the suddenly life filled congregation that is either safe or risky. Through the Smiths, round the Franks, squeeze between the pew and the pillar ignoring Mrs Brown and maybe I will get to shake her hand, or his, depending on your preference. Or the safe strategy of standing still and pretending you have finished. You may then get away with shaking the hands of those people who have happened to have noticed that you are alive and sitting next to them.

Whatever strategy you choose, I reckon 80% will not look in the eyes of the person they are bestowing the peace of the Lord to; at least that is my experiential observation. But maybe that is the key to understanding this, 80% of people don't, or can't look *me* in the eye. But most of the time I don't struggle with my self-esteem that much and instead conclude that the exercise is meaningless to too many people. Which is a shame, because I reckon that not many of us enjoy much peace in our lives!

But perhaps there is a deeper hidden undercurrent here, one that says more about us than the levels of discourtesy we are prepared to accept in public. As an observer of this phenomena; seeing how many people you can shake hands with before the organ (or band depending on your particular expressions), it can appear to be an activity of individuals doing something to or for each other; the meaning being in the person-to-person encounter. This same observer would probably read in scripture the encounters between Jesus and his disciples where he says 'Peace be with you.', and miss entirely that the 'you' is in fact plural.

As a person, peace is great! Sitting with a hot chocolate, listening to the kids happily playing together outside, feeling safe and secure in my relationships, career and finances. But as a group of people, as a community of long-timers, new comers and visitors, peace is very different. Peace might actually mean being brave enough to forgive, being strong enough to engage, being willing to bear one another's burdens and celebrate their joys. Peace to a group is much harder.

Maybe this is what we are hiding from when we avoid eye contact, looking for our next handshake victim as we casually say 'peace'. Perhaps too this is at the root of our suspicion and hopelessness for peace elsewhere. At work, in our local community, in our politics, in our newspapers and on our screens (which of course is as close as most of us get to real peacelessness)

Within a few minutes of playing this exercise, safe or risky, we will say together, "We are one body because we all share in one bread." Perhaps it might be more honest for us to say "Despite being a collection of individuals we are all willing to share this one bread (as long as it comes in individually made wafers)'

Peace of the Lord be with y'all.