

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Easter Day – 12th April 2020

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Unsurprisingly, in an international crisis of the proportions of the coronavirus pandemic, people are asking some searching questions of faith leaders. The one I haven't been yet been asked directly is: 'Why does God allow it?' But I suspect the question lurks beneath many of the conversations I am having with non-churchgoing friends, and that many who normally attend churches – clergy included, on their bleaker days – may find themselves asking the question too. There is something about the sight of mass burials in unmarked graves beside a derelict building in New York that makes the human spirit revolt, and it is only natural to ask where a loving God is to be found in all this.

The answer given by the writer Elie Wiesel, reflecting on his experiences as a prisoner in Auschwitz, was this. He recalled how two Jewish men and a youth had been hanged in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour, because his body was lighter.

'Where is God?' Where is he?' someone asked behind me. ... And I heard a voice in myself answer: 'Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows.'¹

The theologian Jürgen Moltmann called this a 'shattering expression' of the theology of the cross, and it inspired him to write extensively about the notion of a suffering God. It spoke to the times, for in the second half of the twentieth century the sense of triumphalism that often characterised Christian language in the nineteenth century no longer resonated with people's lived experience in the aftermath of two World Wars and the Holocaust. As the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in a letter, himself awaiting execution in a concentration camp for his involvement in the plot to assassinate Hitler, 'only a suffering God can help'. The message of Good Friday is that that's exactly the sort of God we have.

¹ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, 1967, p 75.

The idea of an omnipotent God who could somehow wave a magic wand and take away suffering but chooses not to do so is essentially a creation of 18th century philosophy. Such a God would be a monster, and I have no hesitation in telling my atheist friends that I don't believe in the God they don't believe in. But this is not the God we find in the pages of the Old and New Testaments. As Rowan Williams put it: 'If you want to know who God is and what God does, look at the Cross.' The idea is expressed by the priest W H Vanstone in his hymn 'Morning glory, sunlit sky':

Therefore he who shows us God
helpless hangs upon the tree;
and the nails and crown of thorns
tell of what God's love must be.

Here is God: no monarch he,
throned in easy state to reign;
here is God, whose arms of love
aching, spent, the world sustain.

The assurance we are given on Good Friday is that, whatever happens to us and to our world, nothing can separate us from the love of God, for God has been there before us. And the assurance we are given at Easter is that death itself could not contain God, and so (to quote St Paul) not even our own death 'can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus'. Easter does not end on Easter Day. Jesus's parting words to his disciples in Matthew's Gospel are 'Remember, I am with you always, till the end of time'.

That is Gospel. That is good news. And it's the reason we are here today, in these extraordinary times and in this unusual version of church.

The event of Easter is a mystery. No one knows how it happened. The raising of Christ took place without any of us present, nor any of the disciples. But we can see its effects. And its effects are seismic (literally, in Matthew's account). It changed a small group of frightened men, hiding behind locked doors, into the greatest missionary force the world has ever known, altering the course of human history.

Our Gospel reading pinpoints the moment when it began. Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb in the early light, to grieve for the Lord whose loss she can hardly bear, the violence of Good Friday reverberating within her. She is

traumatised, as many are traumatised now. A terrible price is being paid by front line workers in our health and social care systems, and by those who have lost loved ones, livelihoods, confidence in the very shape of things. We are facing a time of grief and dislocation that hasn't been known since the War, barely beginning to discern the shape of the changes that will follow. And across the world people are living in real fear of the virus. Hiding behind locked doors.

Mary jumps to the conclusion that Jesus's body has been stolen, and the grief which brought her to the tomb is compounded by the assumption that even the last vestige of him has been taken away. No wonder she weeps. The men who come with her go into the tomb, look at the evidence and go home, back behind their locked doors.

But Mary does something else. She bends down to look into the tomb. And it is then that she sees angels. And it is then that she hears the one whose voice she never thought she would hear again. By confronting the worst thing that has happened to her ('They have taken away my Lord'), looking into the darkness of the tomb, she turns and encounters the risen Christ, calling her by name. That moment has been captured by artists across the centuries, the moment of profound transformation. The moment when despair turns to hope, death is shattered into life and darkness turns to light. Throughout John's Gospel the promise has been repeated: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'

The coronavirus is often spoken of as an enemy to be conquered. The ability of the human spirit to overcome intense suffering through the assurance of the love of God was once described by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in these terms:

Goodness is stronger than evil
Love is stronger than hate
Light is stronger than darkness
Life is stronger than death
Victory is ours through him who loves us.

It is by looking into the darkness that Mary encounters the risen Christ, calling her by name. She turns, from despair to hope, from death to life, from darkness to light, and becomes the one who proclaims the good news to the disciples, who together become Christ's hands, Christ's feet, Christ's body in the world.

Will we find the courage to do the same?

Let us pray the prayer of St Francis of Assisi:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace
Where there is hatred, let me sow love
Where there is injury, pardon
Where there is doubt, faith
Where there is despair, hope
Where there is darkness, light
And where there is sadness, joy

O Divine Master, grant that I may
Not so much seek to be consoled as to console
To be understood, as to understand
To be loved, as to love
For it is in giving that we receive
In pardoning that we are pardoned
And in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.