ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Epiphany Sunday – 3rd January 2021

Jane Quarmby, Reader

Anyone who has seen a child's nativity play will have seen three youngsters dressed in velvet robes run up by their mothers, with false beards and shiny crowns, arrive to see the baby Jesus. They will have boxes supposedly containing expensive presents of gold, incense and myrrh. In a big production they might even be towing a camel behind them. Tradition has it that they were called Gaspar, who was the king of Sheba and brought frankincense a symbol of worship; Melchior, the King of Arabia who brought gold for a king, and Balthazar, the King of Tarse and Egypt who brought myrrh – a more gloomy present signifying death and embalming. Gaspar wore a green cloak and had no beard, Melchior wore a gold cloak and had a long white beard, and Balthazar had a black beard and wore a purple cloak. In churches, the wise men don't arrive at the crib until twelve days after Christmas Day, giving them time to make the long journey following their star.

These traditions have crept in over the years – the Bible accounts just say wise men came from the East – no names, no details, certainly no descriptions, other than that they sought out the new King of the Jews. They were learned, educated men from abroad who must have studied the old Jewish writings and prophecies and added two and two together to such an extent that they came to see the fulfilment of so many predictions. As with so many traditions, the details that crept in over the years stand for something. Even the beards weren't just beards – the man with no beard represents youth, the man with the black beard represents maturity, and the long white beard wearer represents old age – so all ages of mankind were represented by these travelers. And of course they also symbolise us, the foreigners, non-Jews. They were amongst the first people to understand who and what this child was, and what he would become. The first Gentile believers in fact.

Epiphany and Christmas both feature gifts. Many people nowadays have lost sight of what the real purpose of Christmas is, in the consumer driven society of many parts of the world. It's all about buying and wrapping presents, putting them under

the tree ready for Santa or Papa Noel to distribute to the family on Christmas Day, and getting together with friends and family for a feast of food and drink and that lovely old word – carousing! As we've experienced at a friend's house on Christmas Eve, it can plumb the depths of over excited children ripping open every parcel and then flinging it aside to get onto the next. A far cry from the celebration of the true gift of Christmas, the gift of God's only son, born in a stable 2000 years ago. Sometimes, perhaps, we who think of ourselves as Christians also take this amazing gift from God in our stride, as if we have accepted the parcel and then put it in the corner rather than unwrap it. Or we have, like those grandchildren of our friends, unwrapped it and then left it to go onto something potentially more exciting rather than really look at it and see how it works.

Some of us aren't very good at accepting presents. It's like asking for help – whether it be from other people or from God – it's so often the case that we plough on alone until it becomes a crisis and we get into a muddle and we are forced to ask for help. We are embarrassed by receiving a big expensive present. Or by receiving a present from someone for whom we have nothing.

Rev Sue Goodwin had some wise words on this in her reflection last Sunday and made me think twice. She writes "A gift by its very nature is not a reward or something we deserve. It is an expression of love. (We can ruin this understanding by treating the gifts that Father Christmas brings as being rewards for good behaviour.) John, in the opening of his Gospel, points us to the amazing gift that God gives us in Jesus – the power to become children of God … if we receive Jesus and believe in him then we are born again into a new relationship with God, an intimate relationship of father and child… We cannot earn it, we don't nor ever will deserve it. It is freely given out of God's love for us. All we have to do is receive it."

A gift made from love is something very special. How much more a homemade card or gift means to us than a mass-produced shop bought one. How many of us treasure things made for us by our children or grandchildren. Imagine then how much more God treasures us when we come to understand just what it is he has given us – our adoption by him as his children. As John says, "But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God." Children usually resemble their parents – that's a huge challenge in itself if we are to resemble God.

For those of us stuck in that difficulty of receiving a gift without giving anything back – we need to know what it is that our father God would like. What can you give to the creator of the world? This year, more than many, we have seen just what he would like, as we gave to charity, raised funds for chickens for Christmas dinners for poor families who otherwise couldn't afford one, put together boxes of toys for children who won't have a tree and lots of presents underneath it, asked our families not to buy us presents but to buy a goat for someone in Africa to make them self-sufficient, sponsored a child in India, the list goes on. We heard over Christmas of a woman lowering down food parcels to the lorry drivers stuck at Dover, unable to get home for Christmas. Three young men in England have sourced and cooked 5000 meals for people all over the country from a pub in Leicestershire. People have checked up on elderly neighbours and made sure they had a meal at Christmas. In a village in Leicestershire neighbours turned out at 2 o'clock in the morning to put up sandbag barriers to stop houses at the bottom of the village getting flooded in Storm Bella.

We are now all one family, God's family, and as such we should look after one another. The best present of all for God our father is to look around at this enormous, diverse family and see it living in harmony, being kind and thoughtful to one another, making sure our brothers and sisters are cared for, have their share of the bounty of the earth, enough and more to eat, somewhere safe and warm to sleep. It's not down to him to do all that – it's down to us. With the pandemic still raging, 2021 will be just as challenging as 2020 has been, and we need to carry on praying for others and giving practical help wherever we can. Our family doesn't just need help at Christmas – it needs help every day. If we make any New Year resolutions, lets make them about helping others in whatever way we can. Phone that person living alone, give away our surplus clothes and things to charities, give our time, money and effort to those who have less than us, speak up against injustice, consider the needs of others – and let us be judged by our deeds, not our words.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – First Sunday after Epiphany – 10th January 2021

The Baptism of Jesus

The Revd John Smith

As you will have realised, the gospel readings this year are from the gospel of St. Mark. I like Mark's gospel. It is different from the two other comparable gospels, Matthew and Luke. Mark's gospel is more dynamic. It moves at pace driven by words such as straightway and immediately. It is the all- action gospel. We have the book called the Acts of the Apostles or the Acts of the Holy Spirit as I like to call it. Mark's gospel could be called the Acts of Jesus as more than Matthew and Luke, Mark focuses on what Jesus did rather than His teachings. For example, Mark has most of the miracles but few of the parables. And Mark is straight into the action. Mark has no genealogies of Jesus as in Matthew and Luke. He also omits all reference to Jesus' birth and childhood. With only a brief introduction, he plunges immediately into the public ministry of Jesus. This may have been because Mark was writing at Rome and the Romans glorified action. The Romans did not ask "Where did He come from?" or "What did He say?" but "What has He done?" That is the question that Mark answers for them regarding Jesus climaxing in the death, resurrection and salvation of Jesus, the Son of God.

Our reading this morning starts at verse four of the first chapter of Mark thus omitting the first verse in which Mark states the purpose of his gospel and indeed gives the title of the whole book. Mark starts his gospel writing "the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God". Note that Mark says "the Good News about Jesus Christ" rather than "the Good News preached by Jesus."

Having said that, two thirds of our reading this morning is about John the Baptist as we are told the details of even what John wears and eats; details that we are never told anywhere about Jesus as far as I know. However, it is the baptism of Jesus that Mark relates simply and quickly that we want to focus on. It is extraordinarily special to me as we have in one place at the same time the three persons of the Trinity. In addition to Jesus, we have God who speaks and the Holy Spirit who appears in the form like a dove, not that the Holy Spirit was a dove but appeared like a dove which was probably the best simile that Mark

could think of. This baptism is also extraordinary because it marks the beginning of the Messianic ministry of Jesus.

Let us look at the reasons why Christ chose to be baptised; and maybe we should use a verb stronger than chose, because when John questioned whether he, John, should baptise Jesus, Jesus insisted that he must be baptised. There were several reasons for this:

- As Jesus was sinless, he did not need the repentance and cleansing from sin which John's baptism signified but by his baptism, Jesus completely identified himself with us and our sin
- The baptism indicated that Jesus was consecrated by God and officially approved by God as shown in the descent of the Holy Spirit and the words of approval that God spoke. All of God's righteous requirements of the Messiah were met in Jesus
- At Jesus' baptism, John publicly announced the arrival of the Messiah that he had prophesied about and the inception of Christ's ministry
- A fourth reason was to fulfil and illustrate John's prophecy that with Christ's arrival, from there on, baptism was to be by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not simply alight on Jesus; Jesus is infused with the Holy Spirit, permeated by the Spirit, instilled, imbued, completely filled with the Spirit from God.
- His baptism was an example for his followers to enact in their lives

And the impact was immediate. Matthew says the heavens opened but Mark is more dramatic. He says the heavens were torn apart and God was let loose on the world. I added the second part. Perhaps that is a forward-looking allusion to Christ's death on the cross when the veil of the temple was torn in two but whether or not that was intended, the entire fabric of creation, the nature of creation was changed by the baptism of Jesus. And I think that Mark subtly prepared us for this in the opening words of his gospel when he wrote "the beginning" which is an echo of the verses of our OT reading "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth". Christ's baptism marked the beginning of the remaking of the heavens and the earth.

From there I want to explore other links between our readings including the psalm as there is one ever present theme from the beginning of time, throughout the Old Testament, Christ's ministry and living today. And that is the voice of God. There is something extra special about God's voice because He makes things happen when He speaks. In our OT reading today God spoke and

it happened. He said let there be light and there was light and following that, let the dry land appear. And it was so. Let the earth put forth vegetation. And it was so. Let there be sun and moon. And it was so. God said let the earth and the sea bring forth living creatures and it was so. There is power in the voice of God, in the words of God. God's voice is for more than communication. It brings about action. Words don't just describe things. They do things. They make things happen. They change people. They have the power to do good and as we saw in Washington DC last week; they have the power to do harm. The pen might be mightier than the sword but neither is as powerful as the spoken word especially the spoken of word of God.

Turning to our Psalm we see the power of God's voice. The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
breaks the cedars, causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare. The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire and shakes the wilderness. All this begins with Gloria in excelsis and ends with peace to men on earth thus wrapping a nice Christmas ribbon around the voice of God. It is thought that the Psalmist may have been inspired to write this psalm after witnessing the power of a thunder and lightning storm which can be awesome indeed.

So, as we start this new year it is worth each of us asking ourselves whether the voice of God still has the power of thunder and lightning to us. If not (and for many this would be an honest assessment), we should come humbly to God and confess that His voice, His Word, sounds more like the drop of a paper clip than a thunderbolt – and ask for a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit to make our cold hearts warm once again, and our dull hearing sharp once more.

I thought a good way to do this on the day that we remember Christ's baptism would be to repeat the vows that were made on our behalf when we were baptised or maybe we said ourselves if we were old enough when we were baptised as I was. So, if you are able, would you like to stand please?

Minister: We all wander far from God and lose our way. Christ comes to find us and welcomes us home. In baptism we respond to his call. Therefore, I ask: Do you turn away from sin? **All: I do**.
Minister: Do you reject evil? **All: I do.**
Minister Do you turn to Christ as Saviour? **All: I do.**
Minister: Do you trust in him as Lord? **All: I do.**
Minister: Let us affirm our common faith in Jesus Christ. Do you believe and trust in God the Father,

source of all being and life, the one for whom we exist? **All: I believe and trust in him.**
Minister: Do you believe and trust in God the Son, who took our human nature, died for us and rose again? **All: I believe and trust in him.**
Minister: Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit, who gives life to the people of God
and makes Christ known in the world? **All: I believe and trust in him.**
This is the faith of the Church. **All: This is our faith. We believe and trust in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**

Amen.

Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille with Aix-en-Provence and the Luberon

17th January 2021
Second Sunday of Epiphany

Reflection

"Come and see," the man said.

He had taken a seat near me, on the train to the backwater place where I was teaching Maths. The commute time of over one hour was very valuable reading time. On that day I was engrossed in my newly acquired copy of Jean Delumeau's *La Peur en Occident* and had just started on the chapter about eschatological fears, that is, the anxiety that the end of the world is near. My neighbour began a conversation to show his appreciation of my interest in the Last Judgement and the apocalypse.

He introduced himself as belonging to an Adventist church that was, as he put it, truly inhabited by the Holy Spirit – his own spontaneous and impassionate preaching was a testament to this. I was graciously offered a sample of his preaching, on the theme of the signs of the end of the Age. He was sure that his community was among the righteous at God's right hand, who will inherit the kingdom prepared for them. And what about me? At my still young age (I was in my early 20s), I was wearing no jewellery, no make-up, no nail varnish, my dress was simple and modest (trousers were not permitted by the communist department of education and high heels were not the best choice for treading dirt roads). And I seemed to read the most appropriate kind of stuff. So, there was some hope for me. Provided that I joined his vibrant church. Provided that I got to know and committed to 'his' Jesus Christ, the Jesus Christ he had found.

"Come and see." He had picked me out to be his Nathanael. 'Where did you get to know me?', I felt an urge to ask him – his perception of me was upsettingly superficial.

I didn't refuse his invitation – but I didn't visit his church either. Out of prejudice – can anything good come out of an insignificant small town? And also because, for me, his very assertive and demonstrative faith was, at that time, not very appealing. Or, perhaps, it was intimidating.

Nathanael is intimidating with his spontaneous outburst: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" He has been for one minute with Jesus, and he can already profess two messianic titles! He seemed to have trodden already the discipleship path to its end. Or has he? We meet him again at the very end of John's Gospel, by the Sea of Tiberias, where Jesus appears to seven of his disciples, after his resurrection. On this occasion, we learn that Nathanael is from Cana – it is, therefore, quite likely, that he had witnessed the first sign of Jesus, the changing of water into wine at a wedding in Cana, which you will hear about next Sunday.

The synoptic gospels, those of Mark, Matthew and Luke, don't mention Nathanael, whose name means "God has given". In the ancient list of the Twelve disciples, which these gospels provide, we have the name of Bartholomew, preceded very often by Philip. 'Bartholomew' is a patronymic, with a clear reference to his father's name: "bar Talmay" meaning "son of Talmay". As there is no narrative of Bartholomew's calling by Jesus, and he appears to be among the first disciples, he has been traditionally identified as Nathanael.

There is no information about Nathanael-Bartholomew's apostolic activity. According to the fourth-century historian Eusebius, traces of Bartholomew's presence had been discovered in India. The Armenian church consider him to be their founder, alongside Jude Thaddeus. Later tradition of his death by flaying became very popular. His relics were brought to Western Europe, and, in the 11th century, Canterbury Cathedral was presented with one of his arms.

It is a rather beautiful acknowledgement for someone who has lived his attachment to Jesus Christ and has witnessed to him without performing sensational deeds.

Whether Nathanael has actually travelled to India – we cannot know. Jesus had promised him a journey, one that was much more extraordinary. "You will see greater things [than being seen by the Messiah under a fig tree]. You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Nathanael might have thought he was to travel to Bethel, the place where Jacob, son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham, had had a vision of a ladder reaching into heaven, with angels ascending and descending. With the coming of Jesus, that place, named 'God's house' was no longer a place where God opens a gate for humankind to have a glimpse of his glory: Jesus, as the Son of Man, becomes the fulfilment of Jacob's vision, the ongoing connection between

heaven and earth, the manifestation of God's glory among us and the ascending of our humanity towards the Father.

John's Gospel makes it clear that this fulfilment happens at the very moment of Christ's crucifixion – the disciples' journey shall conform them to Christ crucified, in a permanent and renewed conversion to God.

The early Renaissance mystic Catherine of Siena thought of the cross carrying Jesus' body as a ladder to heaven, on which she could climb toward God, raising from humility to obedience to peace.

According to John, Nathanael-Bartholomew was granted an encounter with the resurrected Christ. And according to Luke, he was a witness to the Ascension. He has perceived God's new creation, the grace of God made manifest and available to all.

In the Sistine Chapel, in Rome, Michelangelo has painted Bartholomew at the centre of what it is, perhaps, the most dramatic representation of the Last Judgement. In his left hand, Bartholomew holds his flayed skin, hanging between heaven and hell. The face on the skin is the tragic and anguished self-portrait of the artist. Michelangelo's face is placed on a line that passes through Jesus' pierced side, the crown of thorns and the place on the cross where the 'titulus', the inscription bearing Jesus' name and the title of 'King of the Jews', had been. At the same time, Bartholomew determinedly turns his face to behold, with new eyes, God. Christ's life-giving glance, directed to the disciple, keeps him afloat in the vertiginous cosmic drama that surrounds him.

In a poem written at about the time when he was working at the Last Judgement, Michelangelo pleaded:

"[Lord] stretch out thy pitying arms to me, take me
Out of me, make me one that pleases Thee."

It could have been Nathanael's prayer after receiving Jesus's promise. A disciple's journey begins with recognising something of Jesus's identity (in the first chapter of John's Gospel, not one disciple articulates Jesus' identity in the same way: Lamb of God, Rabbi, Messiah, Son of God, King of Israel …) – Jesus is always revealing himself to us in new ways. The disciple's journey will be transformative, as one needs to be freed of the old 'skin' and to accept to be wrapped up in Christ's life. Some will shed into charismatic leaders and passionate preachers. Yet others will be so transformed that their paths model the humble one that Catherine of Siena wanted to take. Contemplative Nathanael, who had longed for peace and consolation in the shade of a fig tree, might have walked this way.

John's Gospel begins with an invitation: "Come and see". This is the deepest call to the journey towards being fully and deeply human in Jesus Christ. A call to share in his prophetic,

priestly and royal mission. A call that more often than not will bring one to feel unsettled, bewildered, vulnerable, wounded. As each of us has infinite worth for God, he will come to find us in the darkest places of our lives, when our eyesight begins to grow dim and our hope to hear his voice falters. He will persistently speak to us, he will faithfully keep his lamp burning. He will encompass us behind and before and lay his hand upon us.

May we awake to the God of promise and invitation who knows and calls our names, and longs for us to listen. 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'

Amen.

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Third Sunday of Epiphany – 24th January 2021

Christine Portman - Reader

I wonder if during the first lockdown you suddenly found dozens of little videos, cartoons and jokes popping up on your devices? I certainly did! In WhatsApp groups and family blogs, people wanted to lift the spirits of friends and relations, thrust as we were into a strange and unnerving situation. One video was sent to me several times – so perhaps you've seen it too. It opens as a young father reads a bedtime story to his young son and begins: *It was a world of waste and wonder, of poverty and plenty. Back before we understood why hindsight's 2020.* He goes on to describe this world - the world we now live in, touching on issues we're all too familiar with – the negative impacts of globalization, the growing gap between rich and poor, climate change and pollution threatening the Earth. But at the end, rather like those reassuring John Lewis Christmas ads, there's a happy ending. The father tells his son that after a great virus infected the world, people had a change of heart. They began to work for a cleaner and fairer future in which there was just sharing of Earth's blessings. The story he tells is called *The Great Realisation*.

How many times have I read or heard over the past year, "I hope the world doesn't simply return to what we had before"? Thanks to David Attenborough and others, millions of us now understand the consequences of failing to change our human behaviour – consequences for all life that shares this 'perfect planet'. People are anxious for the future, especially the young. We need to change – and transformation is at the heart of today's gospel. Under Jesus' direction, fundamental change is possible. Jars of water become not simply wine – but the very best wine ever tasted – wine that is to be tasted *now.*

Mary, probably part of the host family is deeply embarrassed: the wedding wine is running out, but Jesus' first response to his mother seems pretty harsh: *Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?* It's as though he's marking a break between

them. Three days after his baptism Jesus now has a new family gathered around him. His mission is beginning but he knows that as yet, his *hour has not yet come*. What follows is a key moment in the gospel. When John writes that this is the first of the *signs* performed by Jesus, the Greek word he uses doesn't only signify first in order of sequence, it also means *key*. This first sign or σημεῖον - sémeion is a pointer which helps us to unlock the meaning of Jesus' being. It leads us, like the first disciples, to put our trust in him.

His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you". Even before the sign, Mary has complete faith in her son – but the others need to witness the transformation in order to believe. *Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.* John's gospel reveals the true nature of Jesus Christ in order to bring us to faith. Revealing himself as the Son of God, Jesus orders the servants to fill six large water jars *to the brim.* These jars are the type used for Jewish purification rituals – but they are not quite full. Jesus wants them to be filled to overflowing. It must have seemed a bizarre request: what could he be intending?

For a very long time now, in the more affluent and peaceful parts of the world, many of us have enjoyed a standard of life which seems to be overflowing. The older ones among us may have personally experienced the horrors of war, but those of us who have enjoyed a peaceful and prosperous life have perhaps grown used to thinking of ourselves as the ones in control. Most people have enough to eat and a roof over their heads; many of us have more than we need. Well-organised states have provided health care systems and free education. We have thought our democracies strong and able to protect our freedoms.

Recent events have shaken some of those "certainties". As people increasingly choose their personal news sources, clever algorithms top up their feeds with ever more material that seems to suit their profiles. Conspiracy theories gain ground and consensus in our societies grows weaker. As the fall-out from the siege of the US Capitol continues to reverberate across the world, we have seen the powerful effects of a Big Lie. But maybe the biggest lie under which we have been living is that we are in control. We are not.

The power that created and sustains our universe is none other than God and Jesus manifests that power at the wedding. God's laws rule, and when they are broken,

suffering follows, as day follows night. We inhabit a moral universe. In the chapter that follows this first sign we're introduced to Nicodemus, not only a Pharisee steeped in the scriptures, but a very important man, a member of the ruling council. He's heard about Jesus and is troubled, so he visits him secretly, by night. Acknowledging him as *Rabbi,* he says: *we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him*. Jesus senses the unstated question and seems to give an oblique answer: *Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.* Transformation, as shown at Cana, is the key to the kingdom. In *Water into Wine,* his book on John's Gospel, Stephen Verney, explains:

This key sign tells us that what Jesus brings about is transformation. Water is transformed – but water is the raw material of our human nature. It is this raw material of human nature that is to be transformed, and this will be done not by crushing it and abolishing it but by filling it up to the full, and then exposing it to the transforming power of a new order. In that new order, as part of a new pattern around a new centre, our destiny will be fulfilled. The self will become the true Self. Ego-centricity will be transformed into Love.

We are all as Muriel's email tag reminds *On the Journey.* Being shown that we must transform sounds radical. It is! For some people, like Paul on the road to Damascus, fundamental change can happen in a flash, but for most of us it's often more a case of three steps forward, two steps back as we struggle to leave the selfish self behind. But as we do, little by little, God fills up the space we make and opens our eyes to what he wants us to do in this life. The words of a famous hymn can help our daily prayer:

May the mind of Christ, my Saviour,
Live in me from day to day,
By His love and power controlling
All I do and say.

St Teresa of Avila famously taught: *Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

The transformation of our world is possible, and it will happen through individuals like you or me. It is never too late for change. With God all things are possible!

Amen

Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille with Aix-en-Provence and the Luberon

31st January 2021
Presentation of Christ in the Temple
Candlemas

Reflection
The Revd Jamie Johnston

One of the things people are finding most difficult about the continuing pandemic is the sense of life being on hold. Here in France, we wait to be informed of the new restrictions that will be introduced in the coming days. '*Il faut être patient*' (we must be patient), is the reply I often receive from a wise friend who has twice recovered from serious illness and knows the reward of patient waiting.

Patient waiting is the hallmark of Simeon and Anna, whom we meet in the temple this morning. They were marked out by their willingness to wait on God, in contrast to the hectic city of Jerusalem around them. Living examples of the notion that 'the best is yet to come', living with a faith that God has in store for them something beautiful but that they won't know it until they see it. Perhaps in a time of lockdown there are things we can learn from these figures, and from the reward to their waiting that is recounted in our Gospel reading.

Into the scene of expectation walks a couple with their six week old child. Possibly a little awestruck by their vast surroundings, coming as they do from rural Galilee, tired after a long journey and the sleepless nights of young parenthood, yet also with a sense of fulfilment in carrying out the required rituals of their tradition. The tradition was that a firstborn male child should be brought to the temple to be 'offered' to the Lord, though the offering was in practice 'redeemed' by whatever symbolic gift the couple could afford – for the wealthy, a lamb; for those of modest means, two small birds.

Simeon and Anna each become aware that this is the moment they have been waiting so long to see. Out of all the families who have entered the temple to perform this ritual, this one has brought the promised Messiah. Simeon takes the child in his arms and recognises him as 'a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel'. A moment which reveals the significance of everything, not just for him but for the whole world. Simeon's words are an echo from the prophet Isaiah (49.6), who writes of the figure known as the 'suffering servant' with whom Jesus is so often identified: 'I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.' The blessing of God through this child will embrace all humanity.

The temple was the centre of everything in first century Jerusalem – worship, politics and national life. It was also the place where people understood that God had promised he would live among them. The prophet Malachi had foretold it, as we heard in our Old Testament reading: 'the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple', ushering in a new age of justice for the poor and the stranger. Like the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus went on to describe. And when Simeon saw the young couple with their child, somehow he knew that the moment had arrived.

In declaring that the child Jesus was the light of the nations, Simeon's words gave rise to the other name for this feast: Candlemas, the day on which traditionally all the church's candles for the year were blessed. People also used to bring candles (their only source of light) from their homes to be blessed, and in the evening they would place them in their windows. The Christian festival drew partly on pre-Christian practice, when Candlemas was the festival of light, marking the mid-point of winter. In terms of the church's year, we are forty days from Christmas and it is not long before we will begin the forty days of Lent. So it's a turning point, in more ways than one.

Candlemas is a reminder that the rich symbolism of this faith of ours can help us live more confidently through dark times. A candle flame is a particularly suitable symbol for the Christ-child presented in the temple. It is a source of light, but one that is vulnerable. It might easily be extinguished, but instead it sheds a huge amount of light around it. It gives light, but only by being consumed. The vocation to be and to carry the light requires a willingness also to confront darkness. Simeon perceived this too: thirty-three years before Jesus hung on the Cross, Simeon warns Mary of the pain which is to come, a sword that will pierce her soul. Jesus's adult life will embody the very struggle between light and darkness. And here in church, with the celebration of Christmas still fresh in our minds, in the short liturgy we will use at the end of our service, the focus of our imagination will move from the crib to the Cross. What Simeon discerned was that although the climax of the story might involve pain, it would nonetheless be a source of light to the whole world. We will light candles to remind ourselves that we must share that light with our world, in our time, and that the world is in need of it more than ever now.

Christ today still offers himself to be consumed, yet the darkness never overcomes the light. And we are sent to carry that light with us, however costly it may sometimes be. As we heard in the Letter to the Hebrews, 'because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested'. Carrying the light is our vocation.

What is perhaps most striking about this story, and of most help to us as we live through this time of dislocation and strangeness, is the acknowledgement of life's contradictions. The vastness of the surroundings and the intimacy of the moment. Extreme youth meeting extreme old age. Traditional religious practice encountering radical newness. Promise and fulfilment. Darkness and light. Sadness and Joy. Simeon intuitively knows that this child's holiness will be received by others as a challenge to their authority, and that it will lead to suffering. Yet at the same time this child's arrival is fulfilling the world's greatest hope. Living that paradox is one of the challenges, and gifts, of our faith.

So there is poignancy as well as joy in the Candlemas story, which is why it is very much a story for our time. At the end of our service, we will extinguish our candles as we begin to prepare to journey with Christ in heart and mind through Lent and Holy Week towards the stark reality of his suffering and death. But as we go from here let us never forget the light. For the good news of this child's story, the ultimate source of Simeon and Anna's joy, is that suffering and death do not have the last word. The story ends not in death but in resurrection.

The poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote that 'Death is not extinguishing the light; it is only putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.' Writing with similar insight, a contemporary hymn writer offers us this assurance, and this prayer:

> 'For the light is stronger than the darkness
> and the day will overcome the night;
> though the shadows linger all around us,
> let us turn our faces to the light.'

Amen.

Picture: The Presentation in the Temple, Fra Angelico (1395-1455).

Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille with Aix-en-Provence and the Luberon

7th February 2021
Second Sunday before Lent

Reflection
Jane Quarmby, Reader

A few years ago Garry and I visited Rome, and one day we booked tickets for the tour of the Vatican. It was a hot day and we had to queue for quite a while, with various people trying to sell us scarves and trinkets whilst we waited. Once we followed our guide inside, it was spectacular, an enormous palace of huge ornate buildings, everything on a massive scale. As we trotted round in our group, treasure upon treasure was revealed, vista upon vista. We saw the guards, dressed in their distinctive uniforms, lots of priests and nuns in their dark medieval dress, and crowds of tourists like ourselves. It seemed to me to be a place for an emperor, fabulously wealthy and powerful. It was a relief to get out of the heat and indoors to see the Sistine chapel.

The Sistine chapel, the Pope's own chapel, is deservedly world famous for its decoration. Built on the site of a previous chapel, it began construction in 1473 and was decorated by a number of the most famous artists of the Renaissance, including Michelangelo who painted the famous ceiling. We looked up like penguins, in danger of toppling over backwards as we gazed, spellbound, at the paintings all around us. Everywhere I looked, I saw beauty, art, gold, and wealth beyond imagination. This chapel is where the popes are chosen, where all the big ceremonies take place, and where the Pope takes the eucharist. History has been made here.

What, however, I didn't sense, was prayer. It didn't feel at all like a chapel or a place of worship. It didn't feel like somewhere Jesus would be made welcome – I had to wonder if he too would have had to pay quite a lot of euros to see it? In many ways the Sistine chapel made me feel really uncomfortable – was this the church founded on a humble carpenter from Galilee? All this wealth when so many in the world are hungry, thirsty, homeless? The people who lived and worked there dressed in expensive and distinctive clothes, so much ceremony and so businesslike? Where I wondered, was God?

It was these memories that came back to me when I read the Gospel for today from John, and the helpful explanation from Paul in his letter to the Colossians. John sets the scene for his readers in no uncertain terms – "In the beginning was the Word. The Word was close beside God and the Word was God." He goes on to make the extraordinary claim that God, the creator of everything, became flesh and lived among us. In the time that he wrote his gospel, people were of the firm view that God was God and people were people and that was that. They would have found it a very difficult idea to accept that Jesus was both 100% divine and also 100% human. People today still find that hard to accept or understand. No one before or since has seen God, but they did see Jesus, they saw the extraordinary things he did and said.

We probably need to put this in context. John says that Jesus Christ was the Word – for the Greeks, the Word (*logos*) was the rational principle guiding the universe and making life coherent. For Jewish people, the logos was the Word of God, the expression of his wisdom and creative power, and was seen as coming from God and having his personality. The Word was the channel through which everything was created, it brought life and light into the world.

It is through Jesus Christ that God offers new life and light to the world. Sadly, he wasn't recognized as such when he came to live in the world he had created. People didn't want the light that he brought, the new way of life that he taught, they were content to stay in the dark, muddling through in violence, crime, poverty and injustice, illness, and death. Their lives were short, hard, and lived in darkness. Jesus didn't make his home here on earth indefinitely – it was only for a short time. Again, in the Greek, the translation comes as "pitched his tent or tabernacle", reflecting the time of Moses when God could be found in the tabernacle, a transitory building.

Normally I find the writings of Paul a wee bit on the dense side, but not today's – it's really clear in his letter to the young church who are busy drifting away from the central truth and message about Jesus Christ. Colosse was an important commercial centre on one of the main Roman roads in the region and a melting pot of ideas, nationalities, and religions. They had some teachers who didn't see Jesus Christ as the centre and origin of all religious experience, and were emphasizing the importance of various rules, observance of the Sabbath and new moon festivals, and other nif naf and trivia which didn't come from Christ. They were

dressing him up in things which didn't fit and weren't appropriate. For Paul, it's clear that Christ is all we need – trying to add to him is pointless and actually takes away from the power that he gives us to live a new life in the light.

For Paul, Christ is the visible image of the invisible God who existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation. He is the head of the church which is his body. He is the first born – which didn't mean that he was the oldest son, it meant that he was the highest in rank and priority in time. "God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ." Paul had totally accepted what John says in the opening paragraphs of his Gospel. Jesus Christ is the Word of God, the one through whom all things were created, the divine and the human all rolled into one, the light of the world come again to renew a broken world and give us all new life.

He goes on in his letter to warn about listening to people with "empty philosophies and high sounding nonsense that comes from human thinking,…. And not accepting condemnation for not celebrating holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths, ……(the dangers of) pious self-denial or the worship of angels."

Then as now people were being taken in by all manner of new "ologies", searching for answers in new religions or ways of living that would bring them everything they wanted in life. I have a friend who has tried everything from vegetarianism to meditation, searching for answers to life's problems. When all along the answer was there – the humble carpenter who was also the creator of all things, who came to renew our world and us, who came to bring us light and life. She never tried the church – I wonder why?

Did she discover, like I did in Rome, an ornate and beautiful building, but with no-one there to help her in her search for peace? Are people today helped to find Jesus Christ by Christians, by churchgoers, or are they so mesmerized by the trappings of worship that they never see past the ceremonial, the odd clothes that priests wear, the rites that are followed, the calendar of worship, the churches and cathedrals, the wealth of the church, the rules that over the centuries have been put in place by men? The arguments over how many angels can fit on the head of a pin when hundreds of thousands are dying every day from disease, war and neglect.

Perhaps this terrible pandemic is a chance to get back to basics for many. More and more people are joining us in worship, on the ground and via zoom, and searching for answers in some cases, comfort and reassurance in others. As we think about our mission and vison for the future for our chaplaincy, about why we exist, what we are for, we could do worse than focus on the words of John and Paul, and put Jesus Christ at the centre of all that we do. Amen.

Jane Quarmby, Reader

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection –Sunday next before Lent – 14th February 2021

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

High mountains exert a special fascination on many people, and I am one of them.

Some of us approach a mountain with a combination of exultation, fear and joy. Some keep a respectful distance, and, with a sense of awe, try to capture the mountain's drama, as Paul Cézanne did in over 80 oil paintings and watercolours of the Montagne Sainte Victoire.

Others undertake the ascent, wishing to see 'what so great an elevation has to offer', in the words of the 'father' of alpinism, the Italian poet and scholar Petrarch, who climbed Mount Ventoux, the Beast of Provence, in 1336.

My own achievements are rather modest. I lack artistic skills, so I make do with taking hundreds of photos of my favourite peaks. I sometimes lack surefootedness, so I settle for hikes on moderately steep trails, with a preference for uphill paths.

I can well imagine Petrarch's feelings as he sat atop Mont Ventoux with the whole world unfurled below. One could see the hills of the province of Lyon to the right, and, to the left, the sea near Marseille (there was not much pollution in those days). Rather than go to the valley immediately, he opened the copy of St Augustine's Confessions he had brought with him and read: "Men go to admire the high mountains […] yet pass over the mystery of themselves." Petrarch was about to discover for himself that the mountain can be not only the site of outward ascent, but also of deep transformation.

I can well imagine the feelings of Peter, James and John, once they had reached the top of the high mountain where they had been led by Jesus. For the three fishermen, it must have been quite a strenuous exercise, but, on the mountain, they were liberated from the burden of daily life, and could, with delight, embrace the expanse of the creation and its beauty.

The best was yet to come : dazzling clothes, Elijah and Moses - no less - in conversation with Jesus, a voice coming from a cloud, and a Transfiguration!

A Transfiguration? What does it mean? The event does not seem to belong to the central core of the Gospel. The apostles' proclamation of salvation through Jesus Christ does not refer to it. Nor do we, when we declare our faith. And today, on Racial Justice Sunday, some will say that Mark, like so many other Biblical authors, with this story celebrates whiteness by connecting it with holiness - although whiteness, for many, is a construct of privilege and oppression.

The Transfiguration often seemed too mysterious to Western rational minds. There was only a very slow recognition that the Transfiguration provides "a gateway to the saving events of the gospel and allows us to see the mystery of Christ in its unity", in the words of Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey.

On the other hand, the commemoration of the Transfiguration has long been an essential part of the Eastern tradition, where in the liturgical calendar it is seen to be equal to Christmas, Epiphany, Ascension and Pentecost. Allow me, therefore, to do justice to the Transfiguration with the words of some Eastern thinkers.

We have not heard, so far, what the context of the ascent on the mountain is. Jesus is on his final journey up to Jerusalem. Immediately before this passage something akin to a 'Christological discussion' takes place: in turn, the crowds, the disciples and Jesus himself answer his question 'Who do you say that I am?' John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets … offer the crowd. 'You are the Messiah', says Peter. His confession prompts Jesus to talk about the suffering, the rejection and the death of the Son of Man. Peter is outraged, but Christ rebukes him and stresses that not only he, but all those who wish to be his disciples are called to take up their cross and follow him. Follow him in his suffering? It is, I imagine, with a heavy heart that Peter, James and John start climbing the mountain. But once they have reached the mountain top, the fallen world has been left behind. Here it is easier to engage in prayer and to unite the restless mind with God. Here they can open themselves to receive "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ", as it says in our Epistle. God reveals something of His Son's divinity to them, "as much and insofar as they were able to apprehend it" (John Chrysostomos).

The suffering has been left behind, the divine glory illumines them. "It is good for us to be here. Let us dwell on the mountain top." How difficult it is for us to

reconcile the mystery of evil with our faith in the God of love to whom Jesus leads us. Don't we all want to escape suffering?

Approaching the paradox of suffering and evil, the 19th century Russian writer Dostoevsky claimed that beauty will save the world. Is this sheer escapism? Or perhaps an intuition?

Let me offer you another hint, from one of the hymns at Vespers for the Orthodox feast of Transfiguration:

Transfigured today upon the mountain before the disciples,
In His own person He showed them human nature
Arrayed in the original beauty of the image.

We have here the very definition of the Transfiguration in the Eastern tradition: it is the supreme occasion on which the divine Beauty has been revealed to humankind. The divine light that radiated from Jesus revealed him to the disciples as fully human, and, at the same time, as "Light from Light, true God from true God, […] of one being with the Father", in the words of the Creed. Peter did not need to build a dwelling: the one and only tabernacle containing the glory of God was in front of him.

If you think that all this is too mystical to make sense for 21st century pragmatic people, let me tell you that I am thrilled by the language employed by the 14th century archbishop of Thessalonica, Gregory Palamas: he maintained that the light of the Transfiguration was uncreated and divine, identical to the uncreated energies of God. We know today that light is energy. We also know that what we call material "white" light contains all colours. Going back to Palamas, we can say that the uncreated light holds together, as well as bears, all diversity. Natural light, with its manifold colours, is essential for our wellbeing. Likewise, human diversity and all diversity originating in God's love and grace is not only good, but also essential for the wellbeing of our world.

The Transfiguration is not simply the revelation of what Jesus Christ is, but also of what we are. It reveals the glory of being human and the goodness of human diversity. In Christ transfigured on the mountain, we see our human nature united with God, filled with divine energies, yet still remaining totally human.

The beauty that saves the world is this uncreated beauty that shines forth on the mountain; but this uncreated beauty is equally manifested in the sacrifice of the Cross. “The paradox of suffering and evil” says the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, “is resolved in the experience of compassion and love”. First and foremost, this is true of the incarnate God. He is unconditionally committed to be with us in the midst of the anguish and despair of the world. The Transfiguration leads to the Cross, and the Cross leads to the Resurrection: this is where our hope lies.

Let us, therefore, go up the high mountain to understand the mystery of ourselves in the light of God. We will have to go down to the valley as transfigured disciples. We will have to reform ourselves into a transfigured community that radiates the grace we have received, that shares in the suffering, loneliness and discouragement of those around us, that fights poverty, discrimination, injustice.

The world can be transfigured, but this cannot happen without us carrying the cross. Let us ask God to help bear this cross, and to give us strength to hear his voice, in the hope that, in the world to come, we will see him as he is, eternal beauty that transfigures the world.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – First Sunday of Lent – 21st February 2021

The Revd John Smith

When I saw the gospel reading set for today, I had a sense of déjà vu all over again. Wasn't it the second Sunday of Advent when we read Mark's account of John crying in the wilderness? On the following Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent, we had John's account of the voice crying in the wilderness. Last month we met John again in the wilderness and the last two verses of that gospel reading are part of our gospel today. John was baptizing in the wilderness but our gospel today quickly moves on to another wilderness setting where Jesus goes to prepare for his ministry to us.

After putting all this together I said 'so God, I get it, you want me to talk about the wilderness' and He said 'yes and I want you to compare it to lockdown'. I said I would give it a go: here it is.

This talk will be different to the talks that I usually give which have a challenging aspect to them; challenging us on our discipleship, our service to others or our evangelisation of others; my favourite topics. But today I want to look at what strength and comfort we can get from what God teaches us through the wilderness experiences in the Bible. A strength and comfort that not only helps us to survive the rest of the pandemic but help us to grow, flourish and prosper in the knowledge of a God who actively loves and cares for us often without us knowing it. This is not a bible study but there are lots of biblical references and I make no apologies for this, for it was not only Jesus who quoted the bible when he was in the wilderness but the devil did too.

When we think about the wilderness, some of us think of desert conditions: a dry and barren area where little precipitation occurs and conditions are hostile for plant, animal and human life. We think of places of isolation and desolation. Others may think of wilderness as natural environments on earth that have not been changed by human activity. Not being inhabited they are at least places of solitude.

In the Bible the wilderness is the location for various settings. It is the setting for a time of danger – Hagar, the servant of Sarah, Abraham's wife, first alone (Genesis 16:7) then with her son Ishmael (Genesis 21:14); a setting for a time of waiting – Moses tended his father-in-law's sheep in the desert (Exodus 3:1). Most notably the wilderness is the setting for a time of wandering – the children of Israel in the desert for forty years on a journey that could have taken less than a month had they gone directly. The wilderness also is a setting for a time of hiding and hopelessness – Elijah (1 Kings 19:4); a time of witnessing – John the Baptist; and a time of testing and trial – Jesus (Mark 1:13).

And here is the comparison and the question. Have you felt the lockdown to be a time of danger, a time of waiting, a time of wandering, a time of hiding and hopelessness, a time of testing and trial; one, some, all or none of these things? Whatever your experience, I have some wonderful news for you and that is that God was present in every wilderness situation that I have mentioned. He showed up. God did not abandon the people who had these experiences. They were not left to fend for themselves. God was very active for and on their behalf.

In the first example God sent an angel to tell the bewildered Hagar what she should do. God also made an amazing promise to her that her descendants would be too numerous to count (Genesis 16:10). On the second occasion, when Hagar and her son were dying of thirst in the desert, God opened Hagar's eyes and she saw a well of water (Genesis 21:19) but God did not stop there: he continued to be with the boy Ishmael as he grew up (Genesis 21:20).

Moses' wilderness experience looking after his father in law's sheep was not only a time of waiting but it led to an encounter with God and divine revelation. God introduced Himself to Moses, told Moses His name, 'I am who I am', and told Moses what his mission would be.

Turning to the longest wilderness experience recorded in the Bible, the exodus of the children of Israel was as much about coming into a relationship with God as it was about leaving the bondage of Egypt. The people set out at the beginning of the forty years as a very rebellious people manufacturing their own god-idol whilst Moses was up Mount Sinai receiving the ten commandments. They complained about everything: about Moses' leadership, their hardships, their lack of food (the shelves were empty), and the lack of water. If they had had on-line delivery, they would probably have complained about their inability to get a delivery slot. But by the time they came into the promised land forty years

later they were more willing to follow God and keep his laws. At least they said they were (Joshua 24). We can learn much from this wilderness experience.

God is always present. God told Moses that He was to dwell in the midst of His people but His desire was to manifest His presence to the children of Israel in a unique way: the cloud to guide them by day and the pillar of fire to guide them by night. These signs reminded the people that God was in their midst. In the same way God has sent us His Living Word and His Holy Spirit to guide us by day and by night. And even when we turn away from Him, He is still watching over us as He did with the rebellious children of Israel.

God doesn't always take us on what we would consider the most direct route and for our own good too. At the beginning of the Israelites' journey, God led them around danger. The direct route would have taken the Israelites past the Egyptian fortresses and with the Pharaoh's chariots coming behind they would have been trapped. Even if our journey has a few unexpected bends in the road, we should realize that this is just where we need to be. When God is our guide we can forget about the destination and concentrate on today's miles. The course He plots will grow us in His image. We just have to trust Him.

God knows what we can handle and what we can't as He did with the Israelites. He knew that, at the first sign of trouble, His chosen people would have wanted to go back to what they knew in Egypt. They said as much at the Red Sea (Exodus 14: 11-12). God knows what our futures will hold. He knows what will be easy and what won't be. Isn't it comforting to know God knows what lies ahead and can lead us around, over or through the obstacles and challenges of life if we let Him?

God meets our needs miraculously and in abundance. When Hagar needed water in the desert, God provided a well. When the children of Israel needed water, God provided it and from a rock too (Exodus 17:6). If the water they found was undrinkable God cured it (Exodus 16:25). When the Israelites were hungry, God provided them quail to eat in the evening and manna to eat in the morning (Exodus 16:13-14). Just as miraculously, during the forty years of their sojourn their clothes and their sandals did not wear out (Deuteronomy 29:5).

God shows us how and provides the means for us to have a relationship with Him. In the desert God provided the Israelites with the 'old covenant', laws and provisions that would allow them to live as His chosen people and God to have fellowship with them and live among them. God continually provides us with a

solid structure for a relationship with Him. Jesus, through His death and resurrection, initiated the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (31:31) and to ignore or forget that is to forfeit the opportunity to have that relationship.

Lent is an excellent time for us to do some reflection and I hope you all have signed up for the Lent course we are starting on Tuesday evening and repeating on Thursday morning. This year we are reflecting on the pandemic and its consequences. The verse that has sustained me through the pandemic is from Isaiah: 'For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert' We have seen that the desert can be a place of isolation, a place of danger, of waiting, of hiding and hopelessness, a place where we may be tempted to return to our former places and ways even though we know that that is not possible. We have also seen that the desert is a place where idols can be smashed and we can discover the true God; a place that we can discover that what we thought were certainties aren't certainties after all. Above all, we have learnt that God is always present with us and that He cares and provides for us if we will only trust Him completely.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Second Sunday of Lent – 28th February 2021

Canon David Pickering

This morning's Gospel presents us with some very stern sayings of Jesus. Here are just two***. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.*** Then to Peter, ***Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.***

So here we are today, the Second Sunday of Lent. How are we getting on with the Church's principal penitential season? Our chaplaincy Lenten activities, with its personal testimonies and weekly study sessions are no doubt a great help and encouragement to some of us. Comments over this past week show how many valued John's taking us through the wilderness last Sunday.

Lent can be a very barren place at times, especially when it comes to the things we have tried to give up as part of our seasonal fasting. I once asked a rather cynical clerical friend what he had given up for Lent. He said he had failed every year in his denials, so much so, that he had decided to "Give up Lent" and try to do something 'more positive'.

One year, as a young ordinand, about this time in Lent I was with my Spiritual Director, Fr. Ralph Martin SSM. He naturally wanted to know how my Lent was progressing. I had to be honest and admit that I felt it was becoming a total failure. I was way behind in my Lent Book. Worse still, I couldn't cope with my abstinences. Tea without sugar was a nightmare! Such small pleasures can so easily start to seem necessities. He suggested two things: Lent needs to have a firm foundation and consistency, and should always have its eye on Easter.

He suggested that the collect for Ash Wednesday one such firm foundation: ***Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing that you have made and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent: create and make in us new and contrite hearts.....***

For consistency, as was suggested by Cranmer in the Book of Common Prayer, he advised me to use it in my daily prayer for Lent. Sadly, Common Worship relegates it to Post Communion use but if you would like to use it yourselves, I've attached the full text at the end of this reflection.

Jesus's words in this morning's gospel also encourage us to have our eyes on Easter. We cannot know with any certainty that Jesus knew precisely what was going to happen to him. The gospels often read as they are: written in the hindsight of the actual events. But Mark repeats three times in identical words Jesus's predictions of his fate. Matthew and Luke also record triple predictions in one form or another and this would seem to testify that Jesus clearly warned his disciples that he would ***undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed.*** Yet this would not be the end: God would bring him gloriously and victoriously through all these challenges, even his death: ***After three days,*** he will ***rise again.***

In these words Jesus looks forward to a transformed world, not just for himself, but for the whole of humanity. Through his life, death and resurrection, he will bring a new world to the human race, a new humanity, transformed and elevated by the resurrection grace of God. This will be a world in which he promises both cross and resurrection. There can be no resurrection without the cross, no Easter without Lent.

Although he would give up his own life in the end, the idea of Jesus's suffering and death is one that Peter is unable to take on board at this point. We're not told the words that Peter uses, only that ***Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.*** The original Greek here carries a strong sense of rejection. It's the same word used when Jesus confronts evil spirits, the winds and unruly disciples. Peter's ***rebuke*** shows an utter rejection of what Jesus knows will happen, hence his response, ***Get behind me Satan!*** This may seem unduly harsh, but, as the next words show, he is not demonising Peter. Rather the point is that Peter is opposing what Jesus knows has to happen: he is ***setting (his) mind not on divine things but on human things***. Like many other translations, the original Revised Standard Version makes this very clear: ***Get behind me Satan because you are not on the side of God, but of men***.

What Jesus is saying here is that we can choose to live at one of two levels. There is the basic human, almost animal level, where we only think and live out our lives for ourselves and our own self-interested ways of thinking. This was how Peter saw things. He could not accept such terrible things would happen to his

hero. But this was the pre-Resurrection Peter, the frightened Peter who would go on to deny Jesus three times before the cock crowed - not the man who would go on to be a powerful witness to his Lord - and give his own life for his faith.

We now live through our faith in the life death and resurrection of Jesus. By his continuing presence with us through the Holy Spirit, we can live a very different life of hope, enhanced and governed by love, joy, peace and all the fruits of the Spirit. In faith we can live a life in the image of God as declared in the opening chapter of the Bible. (Genesis 1.16 ***Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.***)

This will not always be an easy life, as Jesus shows in the rest of our gospel reading today. It will entail denial, sacrifice and loss. And it is a life that only comes through faith as seen in the faith of Abraham in both today's First and Second Readings. God calls the great Patriarch into a new covenant relation where, as a sign, he will no longer be called Abram (high father - of one family) but Abraham (the father of many - nations). Sarai (mockery) also receives a new name: Sarah (princess). Through this, Paul, in our New Testament Reading declares Abraham the father of all faithful people. But for Paul, in the new covenant, this is now faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ.

We might think of Lent as a positive opportunity to renew our baptised faith, so that when we come to Easter we can truly rise to a new life. Just as a car needs a regular service, or in French a ***revision***, so for us, Lent is the time to give our lives a "service", and even perhaps an MOT, or in French a ***contrôle technique***! Lent offers us the opportunity to check out where we are in our lives, in our personal values, our relationships with others, both close and far, and with the wider world and the natural environment. Above all, a time to consider our life with God.

The Introduction to our Ash Wednesday Eucharist invites us to a holy Lent ***by self-examination and repentance***. As we hear the Christian testimony of others in our chaplaincy before Compline on Wednesday evenings, we can perhaps reflect on and reassess our own faith. In the study group sessions we're thinking about Rowan Williams's reflections on life in the pandemic. We might consider what this strange time has meant for our own faith, and especially our worship.

We are also called to ***a time of prayer***. How about a daily use of the Collect for Ash Wednesday below? And what of the call to ***fasting and self denial***? So often

we only give things up with a selfish motive. Perhaps our denial should be for the benefit of others and the precious world in which we live. In the call to ***reading and meditating on God's holy word***, perhaps we might daily reflect for ourselves on the readings of the previous Sunday. We can all have ideas other than those presented by our clergy team each week!!

However we continue with our Lenten observance, may we keep our eyes on Easter when, through the fruits of a rich Lent, we can rise to a new life - a renewing of our baptismal vows as a sign of our resurrection.

Almighty and everlasting God,
you hate nothing that you have made
and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent:
create and make in us new and contrite hearts
that we, worthily lamenting our sins
and acknowledging our wretchedness,
may receive from you, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and forgiveness;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Third Sunday of Lent – 7th March 2021

Jane Quarmby, Reader

Over the past year we have all had to adapt to a strange new world, one stalked by the spectre of a disease we are struggling to combat, which has made us prisoners in our own homes. An invisible but deadly little microbe, which has killed more people in America than in all the 20th century wars it has fought in, has turned our lives upside down in many ways which we never anticipated. We have all had to change our outlook, our way of living, our interaction with others, our nonchalant travelling here, there and everywhere on cheap transport, how we shop – and how we worship. With the closure of many churches, we have had to adapt to technology, to worship at home. This has brought some benefits – for example, our zoom congregation last week was double our usual Sunday congregation and more and more people are joining us. To our surprise, our acts of worship on a Sunday and a Wednesday have faithful followings of far more people than ever made it to our church buildings in Marseille, Aix or Oppède on a normal day.

It has also brought with it, for many, considerable hardship, loss and grief, illness and loneliness. But perhaps as a result of that, more and more people are turning to online worship. It's in our dark days that we need the support and love of a family, of the promise of hope and reassurance. Our chaplaincy is now regarded as a lifeline for those who whilst really needing a proper hug, are nevertheless getting a virtual hug from the interaction made possible on our screens with people we know or are getting to know and make friends with. We are "doing" church at home, and becoming a more close-knit family in the process.

It has not been an easy move to worshipping at home for many of us – we like the atmosphere of a church, a place where people have prayed, for centuries in some

places. We miss the social side, and the physical communion. For some, travelling a long way, it used to be a day out once a month.

On the plus side, I have really enjoyed the times when some of us out here in the boondocks have got together in small groups to share the eucharist and have lunch together afterwards. Those times were special and I look forward to starting them again soon – not least for the bonding that goes on over a good lunch and a glass of wine or two.

Jesus too seems to have enjoyed sharing meals with friends and colleagues too – and in many cases, those who wouldn't be welcomed by polite society. So it was with interest that I saw that he did have an angry streak in him – in today's Gospel from John, we read about him losing his temper to all intents and purposes and cleansing the temple of the money lenders, the traders, the animals, driving them out. Strong words and strong actions – normally we read of him "driving out" demons, not inoffensive cattle and sheep. For one man to drive all those people and animals out must have taken some real passion and anger. He would have been to the temple many times, but this is the one time we hear about him taking such grave exception to what went on there. And it's interesting that John is the only Gospel writer who puts this account at the beginning of his Gospel – the others put it at the end, providing a strong hint of why the chief priests wanted to get rid of him – he was too much trouble and was shining a spotlight on their little fiefdom.

For the temple was literally the centre of Jewish life – religious, social and economic. But it had changed over the years, and was now, along with the teachings of the chief priests, no longer fit for purpose in the eyes of Jesus. Claire Amos, in her blog this week, puts it better than I can:

> " his actions…. suggest that what he was doing was declaring the Temple "redundant". A hint to this lies in the detail of the target of Jesus' physical actions. In John's Gospel, as well as the money-changers and the human beings who are selling and buying, Jesus drives out the sheep and the cattle and the doves. In other words, Jesus "drove out" the animals that were essential for the Temple's sacrificial cult. … It wasn't simply that he was opposing the corruption of those who sought to make a living by selling "Holy Hamburgers" as over priced snacks to poor pilgrims, but he was challenging the Temple's very raison d'être."

So why wasn't this Temple needed any more?

Earlier in John's Gospel he says "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us". There is no longer any need for the Temple traders changing pagan money into holy money, supplying so called clean animals to sacrifice – there's no longer any need to sacrifice the animals either – Jesus is the sacrifice who will give up his life to make all of his creation holy once more. Christ changed everything through his death and resurrection – he is now the temple, the head of the church and we Christians are his body. It's his followers, his community, who are the church, not a building in which we meet and follow rituals.

So, coming to the present day, over the past year we've had to relook at what it means to be a church. As Claire puts it, 'We have all had a bit of a crash course in the New Testament understanding that "Church" primarily refers to the "Christian Community" rather than the building that in normal times is the place where we meet. We are, it seems, at a real turning point in the life of our church, where we are faced with the prospect of being "churches without walls". It's a point of tension for us all – but also of hope and a new way of looking at what it means to be Christian.'

Perhaps it' s chance to listen to what God wants from us - the Ten Commandments outlined in Exodus specify how we are to relate to God and each other. They still give us a good blueprint for daily life but, everywhere we look, those commandments are being broken. No other God but me – do people worship other things now instead? Don't make any idols or worship them – again, do people worship money and goods instead? Don't misuse God's name – I lose count of how many people do just that all the time. Don't work on the Sabbath – shops are open, transport runs, we do our shopping online, catch up on jobs - forgetting it's not us that will supply our needs but God. Honour your parents – recognise that you are not self sufficient because a bit of humility and gratitude go a long way. Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't tell lies about your neighbour, don't covet anything your neighbour has. When I was little, I thought this referred to our actual neighbours next door but of course it refers to everyone around us. Possessions don't bring happiness any more than we nowadays think sacrificing a white sheep on the steps of the altar will absolve us of our wrongdoing.

But there's a lot of sense in those Ten Commandments and they too are a challenge to us when we think about what it means to be church – with or without walls, whether we go to a special building to worship or feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in our kitchen at home. As life rolls gently on, amid the uncertainty of this grim time for all of us, I am heartened to remember that Jesus is always with me, whether I am praying to him in a chapel, a cathedral, at my desk or kitchen table. He is the one constant in my life – and I hope, in yours too. He's not confined by walls – perhaps we shouldn't be either? As Easter approaches in four weeks' time, perhaps our Lent vow should be to let Him into every aspect of our lives, regardless of where we are or what we are doing.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Fourth Sunday of Lent – 14th March 2021

Mothering Sunday

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

Happy Mothering Sunday to all of you!

Some of you might think that this festival does not concern you, either because you are not a mother, or because, sadly, your mother is not with you anymore. Do not be dismayed: this springtime celebration is for all of us.

This fourth Sunday in Lent, known also as Laetare Sunday, should be a day of relaxation from normal Lenten rigour. It is the second "Rejoice" Sunday in the liturgical calendar, the other one being the third Sunday in Advent, Gaudete Sunday. On both occasions rose (rather than purple) vestments can be worn by priests. The name comes from the first words In Latin of the Introit for the day, from the Book of the prophet Isaiah: "Laetare Hierusalem" – "Rejoice with Jerusalem; and be glad for her: rejoice with her, you who mourn over her; that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast." (Isaiah 66.10-11) - metaphors of consoling and nurturing mothers, and good news of sorrow changed into joy.

Drawing inspiration from one of the psalms set for the day, "I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord!" (Ps 122.1), it became a tradition, in the Middle Ages, for people to return to their mother church for a special service, that is, to the church where they had been baptised, or to the nearest cathedral. Anyone who did so, was known to have gone "mothering".

In later times, servants were given the day off to visit their families, as well as their mother churches. They brought along posies and simnel cakes.

100 years ago, Constance Penswick Smith revived the observance of Mothering Sunday in the British Isles, as an occasion for honouring the Mother Church, mothers of earthly homes, Mary, mother of Jesus, and the gifts of Mother Earth.

You will have noticed that, in recent years, Mothering Sunday, outside the Church, has been overtaken by consumerism – but it remains, nevertheless, an occasion to celebrate the care and love we have received in our lives.

Mothering Sunday is not solely about our mothers, much as we value and honour them. You might be acquainted with this saying: "It takes a village to raise a child." In other words, each of us has needed more mothering than any one mother could ever provide – and we still need to be mothered, regardless of our age.

The book of Exodus tells us about the desperate, sacrificial, attentive, protective, loyal, serving, welcoming, generous mothering, that Moses received in his early childhood.

Like Moses, we all have been shaped by our experiences of being mothered, regardless of who provided that care: people who have protected us, enabled us to learn our purpose in life, have loved us enough to let us go our own way, have been a model of trust and faith, those who have shown us where we are rooted, what gives us life, those who have forgiven us, have tended to our wounds, have stood with us in times of great suffering. I dare say this should also be the care a mother church provides.

It may seem strange that on a day when we are called to rejoice, the Gospel reading presents us with such an abyss of pain: a dying, tortured son, a mother whose heart is breaking, and followers who are bewildered and in despair.

It is, nevertheless, a story of hope and of forward looking. Jesus entrusts Mary and the disciple to one another. At the very moment of being overwhelmed and having the story of one's life stripped of everything that has held it together, the journey out of abyss is made possible. A new community, a new family, a new fellowship of God's people is born through the shedding of Christ's blood, a community of Cross and Resurrection, of faith and hope, a community that we call Church.

The Church was born on the foundation laid by Jesus Christ who conquered sin, injustice, violence, hatred and death on the cross. This is the mothering Church, where Christ's disciples are bound together by the recognition of one another's humanity and the need both to give and to receive love.

We are called into this new family, into this "one body", as St Paul reminds us, as "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved". This is a community of mutual belonging and everlasting love that has its source in God's immeasurable love. Sadly, the church has failed many times to live up to this Gospel of love and respect and care for each other.

I strongly believe that we don't only belong to the Church family for our own and this family's good. We are to be God's holy people for our broken world, feeling the pain of its suffering, willing to sacrifice something of ourselves in order to allow God's purposes for the world to be brought to birth.

Saint Paul's standards for a Christian community are very high: it should be compassionate, kind, humble, meek, patient, forgiving, loving, thankful, wise … There is no such thing as a perfect family – or a perfect church. Like any family, we disagree, we fall out, we hurt each other … If you feel tempted to strive for perfection, to score high as a church, remember the wisdom of the psalmist: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain." (Ps 127.1)

Some of you are not acquainted with Marseille's landmark, the Our Lady of the Guard basilica, perched on a hill overlooking the old port. It is much more than an attractive site for tourists and pilgrims. For the Marseillais, she is "la Bonne Mère", the Good Mother. The bell tower supports a gilded 11 metres tall statue of Mary, that can be seen from all over the city. The Virgin is shown as a "Hodegetria" Mother of God, "the One who shows the way": she directs attention away from herself and presents Jesus to the world as the source of salvation. Not many people know that, inside the statue, there is a spiral staircase to the Virgin's head and that the few lucky ones who get permission to do the ascent can look at the world through the eyes of Mary, who keeps attentive, loving and compassionate watch over the city, with its history of hardship, sharp social divides and strong aspirations to a better life, and, of course, over the seafarers. She watches over those who are near, and those who are far, over those who "belong", and those who do not. Perhaps there is something for our chaplaincy to learn from "la Bonne Mère".

As someone who has lived for nearly half of their life at a 2000-km-distance away from their extended family, I like the idea that family are the people God gives us to look after and those who look after us. That is, people we mother and people who mother us.

Let us all do a bit of “mothering” today! No one should be left out of today’s rejoicing.

In these times, when we have been separated from one another and/or could not interact as we would normally do, we have carried on being a Church family in a different way, and many among us have discovered a renewed sense of belonging. Some bonds have become stronger.

Yet we should not be inward looking – this will only reveal the limits of our own resources, and lead to fear and isolation. Let us look out from ourselves with love and hope. Let us be a community that shows attentiveness in care and nurturing to all those we encounter and to all who turn to us. Through the blood Jesus Christ shed for us on the Cross, we are blood relations. But let us not forget that his blood has been shed for us and for many.

Let our life be shared and given. Let our life together be one of hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore transforming the present. And let us always stand near the Cross of Jesus, the place where transformation begins.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Passion Sunday – 21st March 2021

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Today is Passion Sunday, marking the beginning of Passiontide. Our attention turns from the wilderness experience of Jesus which has been the focus of our Lenten journey so far, towards the suffering that awaits him when he arrives in Jerusalem for the Passover festival, culminating in his arrest, trial and crucifixion.

Our reading from St John's Gospel occurs just after the events of Palm Sunday, which we will celebrate next week - events which, in John's account, end with the Pharisees saying to one another: 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!' The next thing we are told is that some 'Greeks' have asked to see Jesus. These may have been Hellenic converts to Judaism, visiting the city for the festival, although the word 'Greeks' is also used in Paul's letters as a generic word for Gentiles.

The point being made is that Jesus's reputation has spread far beyond the community in which it began, in keeping with his own realisation that his message was not just for 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' to whom he originally felt called, but also for the whole world. A tipping point has been reached, with the religious authorities concluding that the impact of this wandering preacher is now out of control, and Jesus knowing there is only one way this is going to end.

It is hard to overstate the febrile atmosphere that would have surrounded Jesus and the Twelve as they arrived in Jerusalem. The city would have been packed, filled with worshippers from across the region, the occupying Roman forces jittery about the possibility of an insurrection (of which there were many at that time) igniting the tinderbox which the city became during the festival. Jesus warns his followers what lies ahead: 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.' When we read the word 'glory' in John's Gospel it almost invariably means the Cross – the Cross on which God's true nature will be revealed (one meaning of 'glorify' is 'to reveal'). The place where the price of sacrificial love is laid bare.

The image Jesus uses is an agricultural one, as he has done so often in his teaching in rural Galilee. He speaks of a single grain of wheat falling into the earth. It is only if the grain dies and is planted that it yields 'much fruit'. One ear of wheat might contain forty seeds. If each grain is sown individually, the following year they may produce sixteen hundred seeds, in the year after that sixty-four thousand, and in the year after that over two and a half million. But none of that would be possible without the first one. There is a sense of violence within the image, too - it is only if you crush an ear of wheat that its individual seeds fall to the ground.

Since the fourth century (when Christianity became the official faith of the Roman Empire), being a Christian has no longer automatically been associated with a willingness to lay down one's life. It is now more often associated with being a good citizen. Yet throughout history people have been sacrificing themselves for their faith, and still do. Only last week we saw pictures from Myanmar of Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng kneeling in front of a row of armed police, offering her life in place of the children on whom they were about to fire. A sharp reminder of the price of sacrificial love.

There are other examples of sacrificial love closer to home. It's exactly a year since France and the UK went into lockdown for the first time. The first lockdown was marked in many European countries by weekly or nightly applause for the carers who were on the front line of the evolving pandemic. Was it because of their efforts to save lives, working night and day to cope with rising numbers of severely ill patients? Or was it because, in a way we might have found it hard to articulate, they had reminded us of something fundamental about our priorities in their willingness to risk their own lives to save others? Reminding the world that life is not about seeking to protect ourselves from death (despite the amount of our collective energy we put into it), but that in the end what matters is living a good life? Maybe it was both.

The image of the grain of wheat falling into the earth is part of a wider message we find in the Gospels. It's about dying to self and opening ourselves outwards, to one another and to God. This rhythm of letting go and receiving back is something we need to attend to more closely if we are to understand Christ's message which appears two chapters earlier in John's Gospel: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'. We need to allow our hearts to move into the slipstream of giving and receiving, the eternal exchange which we are

taught lies at the heart of the Trinity, an endless mutual giving and receiving in love. 'I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.'

A few weeks ago I received a request to include a piece of music in one of our midweek online services. It was a song originally sung by Bette Midler, which might sound a surprising request for a church service. I replied that I didn't think the song would work as part of the liturgy, but I did promise to preach on it, as I believed that what it expresses comes close to some of Jesus's teaching. That moment has arrived, for the teaching in question is the image of the grain of wheat, the letting go and receiving back. The song is called The Rose, and its middle verse says this:

> 'It's the heart afraid of breaking that never learns to dance;
> It's the dream afraid of waking that never takes the chance;
> It's the one who won't be taken that never learns to give,
> And the soul afraid of dying that never learns to live.'

One of the things with which Passiontide confronts us is our fear of failure. On the face of it, the crucifixion meant absolute failure for the friends and followers of Jesus. Failure is a risk we take when we embark on any endeavour. Yet we may never know what harvest our willingness to allow a seed to die may produce.

I wonder if you know the story of William Leslie. Dr Leslie was a Canadian pharmacist who, at the turn of the twentieth century, became a medical missionary in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 1912, he started a new mission station in a remote jungle community where conditions were particularly hard. He stayed there for sixteen years. Towards the end of his time, he fell out with one of the tribal chiefs and was asked to leave. Whilst the dispute itself was resolved, Leslie left the Congo convinced that his ministry had been a failure.

In 2010 an American missionary visited the area, over eighty years after William Leslie left. Although the area will still barely accessible, to his astonishment he found a network of churches throughout the jungle, each with its own choir, including a stone building like a cathedral that seated 1,000 people, which had become too small for them so they had built more churches. The community ascribed their faith to the teaching of William Leslie all those years earlier. The seed which he thought had died had borne much fruit.

As we move into Passiontide, let us hold on to the image of the grain of wheat that dies. For the harvest that lies beyond it is that of Easter, the ultimate letting go and receiving back revealed in Christ, whose glory nothing and no one can take away - yesterday, today, for ever.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Maundy Thursday – 1st April 2021

Canon David Pickering

Then if I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have set you an example: you are to do as I have done for you.

It is beyond the realms of Zoom liturgical practice to follow the call of Jesus to physically wash each other's feet this evening. But, this evening, we have included some words of a foot washing anthem as they may convey the deeper meaning better than the action itself.

My feet have always been important to me: I was a keen footballer from early teens until my mid-fifties and one of the joys of living in the South of France is the opportunity for walking. Perhaps I may even have something of an obsession about my feet! Every day I carry a pedometer in my pocket. Fitness experts recommend ten thousand steps a day, but I hope those of us of more advanced years might get away with five to seven thousand.

Yet these few thousand steps a day are as nothing compared with those required every day by most people in the ancient world. After walking along dusty roads and fields in sandals or bare feet, foot washing would be an absolute necessity. This menial task would be carried out by 'inferiors' for 'superiors', generally by slaves (often women), by children for parents, wives for husbands, and students for their teachers: never a teacher for his pupils. That Jesus does the reverse adds deeper meaning to his action.

For Jesus, the washing of the disciples' feet is doubly-symbolic. It is an act of the loving service he requires of us: ***I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.*** And this action is one which brings unity. No longer will servants wash masters' feet. As we "wash" each other's feet, and serve one another, even, or especially, serving the "least" among us, this becomes a unifying love, one where power and rank no longer hold sway.

As we move through the climax of Holy Week and Easter we celebrate God's love for us shown in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The cross is the greatest act of love, shown triumphantly in the risen Christ. And this we celebrate in the Eucharist, as St Paul expresses in this evening's New Testament reading: ***For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.***

In this passage from 1 Corinthians 11. 23 - 26, St. Paul gives the earliest written account of the institution of the Eucharist: he was writing some decades before the gospels. As he says, in the Eucharist we proclaim the saving acts of Jesus. This is not a simple commemoration like a birthday or an anniversary, but an active celebration of his saving love. From earliest times the Eucharist has also been called *agape* - a "Love Feast". Here we celebrate our salvation through God's love for us as shown in the death and resurrection of Jesus. At the end of that feast, that celebration, God calls us to go out into the world, sharing that love in all our daily dealings, both with those close to us and those who are afar.

In the words of our Foot Washing anthem:
God is love, and where true love is, God himself is there.

Amen

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 3rd Sunday of Easter – 18th April 2021

The Revd John Smith

Changing Hearts and Minds

At our service in the Luberon on Easter day the reading from John's gospel left us with as many questions as answers. For example, we were told that John "saw and believed" (but not what he believed) followed by "for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." We wondered how was it possible to walk with the living fulfilment of the scriptures for three years and yet not understand the scriptures? And why had the disciples not understood when Jesus told them at least two or three times that he would rise from the dead on the third day? Even the chief priests and the Pharisees knew that Jesus had said this. So, I am grateful that our gospel reading today gives us an opportunity to revisit this statement as, in this post-resurrection scene, we have the verse "then Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures".

Just prior to opening their minds Jesus said "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses must be fulfilled." So, it is back to Moses that we will go to start the journey of learning how God chooses to reveal Himself to us and gives us understanding of scripture. Through Moses God renewed His covenant with His chosen people to prepare them for living in the promised land that they were about to enter. Moses said, "you have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, the signs, and those great wonders but to this day the Lord has not given you a heart (some translations say mind) to understand". This is a scene that has just been replayed with Jesus showing his disbelieving disciples his hands and his feet. "Touch me" he says "I am not a ghost" but they still did not understand.

It is these two translations of the Hebrew word lêḇ לֵב which means 'heart' but is translated as 'mind' in some versions of the Bible that has caught my attention because I believe 'heart' and 'mind' are not the same and the difference may be key to our understanding of scripture. In his renewing of God's covenant with the Israelites, Moses refers to the heart six times. Each time its use is significant.

To summarize, 'the amazing work of God in circumcising (changing) the heart is predicated upon Israel's turning its own heart and returning to God with the whole heart and soul'.

So how are we to understand 'heart' here? We are all used to the idiomatic use of heart to express a wide range of meanings and feelings. Have a heart (sympathy), take heart (courage), in a heartbeat (immediately), heart of gold/stone (kind/cold), heart in the right place (well intentioned) and wear your heart on your sleeve (be open) are just a few examples but what about the use of 'heart' in the Bible? Firstly, references to the heart as the physical organ are few and by no means specific. The Hebrews thought in terms of subjective experience rather than objective, scientific observation. It was essentially the whole person, with all their attributes, physical, intellectual and psychological, which the Hebrew thought and spoke of, and the heart was conceived of as the governing centre for all of these. It is the heart that makes us what we are and governs all our actions. Character, personality, will and mind are modern terms which reflect something but not all of the meaning of 'heart' in its biblical usage. There is no suggestion in the Bible that the brain is the centre of consciousness, thought or will. It is the heart that is so regarded.

When we are told that we should love the Lord our God with all our hearts, we should understand that we should love God with every part of our being not just our minds – with all our soul, with all our strength and yes with all our minds. But our hearts do not always do this. Our hearts are not what they should be. A change of heart is required. The right attitude of heart begins with it being broken or crushed, symbolic of humility and penitence. Repentance and conversion are required. That is why the Psalmist prays that God will search and know the heart and make it clean. And why Jesus says "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God". It is through Christ's dwelling in our hearts by faith the we can comprehend the love of God and begin to understand the true meaning of scripture.
How many times have you heard the mind being an obstacle to faith? How many times have you heard people say 'if I could only understand scripture then I would believe?' Nicodemus is a classic example of somebody who had all the learning possible and the deepest knowledge of the law but he did not understand when Jesus said he must be born again (have a change of heart). It was St Augustine who said "I believe so that I may understand". Saint Anselm of Canterbury expanded on this when he said "I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but rather, I believe in order that I may understand"

From this I conclude that we need a change of heart before we can have a change of mind. A change of heart that comes only by God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit. This is important to understand for it has implications for our own response to God's call on our lives and it has very important implications for how we witness to others. For ourselves it is good to have a 'heart check' periodically to see if we are still faithful in all ways possible. But then we should consider how we fulfil Christ's command at the end of today's gospel, to 'proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations'. We have to win hearts and minds but it is in that order. The change of heart can only happen with the intervention of the Holy Spirit but once that is achieved, the second, the mind change, will follow.

Some people think the greatest help to evangelism today would be to see more miraculous events. After all, who could not believe in the face of such displays of spiritual power? But as the examples of the Israelites and the disciples of Jesus have just illustrated, the greatest wonders imaginable would not have made a difference unless God sent His Spirit to change their hearts.

So how is the ground prepared and the seed of the gospel sown so that it will bear fruit some a hundredfold, some sixtyfold and some thirtyfold as the parable of the sower teaches us? It is the Holy Spirit's work to prepare the ground to receive the seed and we have to accept that there is some compacted ground, some rocky ground that will not be receptive to God's word; the stony hearts that will not change but we do have a significant role to play in the selection of the seed that we sow and how, when, where and to whom it is sowed. And by the way before we proceed, if God's word is not working in your life, you had better check the ground the seed is falling on.

Christians long for a self-sustaining, self-replicating movement of the Holy Spirit that will change the world as it repeatedly presents kingdom beliefs and behaviours, multiplying its effect like a virus to use a bad analogy. Were Jesus here on earth today, I wonder if He would say 'the kingdom of God is like a YouTube video or Internet message that has gone 'viral', passed on one person at a time, rejected by some but where it takes root it multiplies quickly, replicating thirty, sixty or even a hundred times?' The disruptive kingdom the world needs requires disruptive models of 'being' church but we cannot afford to wait for the church to change.

Whilst others talk about planting churches, we individual Christians need to get busy planting gospel seeds. The gospel stories are the seed of viral replication if

you will. Scripture provides the perfect source that can be 'discovered' by all and become a tangible reality when reinforced by kingdom actions on our part. Our walk has to follow our talk. As Chresten Tomlin, an American evangelist said, 'we are called to be like God but we have settled for just being nice'. He went on to say that 'we should remember who we are for we are more than what we have become'. As we grow and strive to become more like God, it is not enough for us to just grasp our own salvation without fulfilling our purpose from the beginning of time: to work for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We must take up this challenge and join the kingdom movement to seed the gospel afresh to be actively working with the Holy Spirit changing hearts and minds for Christ.

It was Easter evening when we remembered Cleopas and his friend as they walked from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were joined by a stranger and their hearts were ablaze, burning within them as the stranger, the unrecognised Jesus, opened the scriptures to them. I pray that it be so with us as we answer God's calling on our lives.

Alleluia. Amen

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 4th Sunday of Easter – 25th April 2021

Reader Christine Portman

We were chatting recently with a friend from the village. Michel's a highly-intelligent man. He's spent his life travelling the world for the UN and other agencies, a good man who's stayed focused on giving what he can to help others less fortunate than himself. So, when we were talking about the environmental problems now facing the planet, I was shocked to hear him say, "Life's just too complex now. We've gone beyond the point of no return".

Today, as is usual in Eastertide, our first reading might have been from Acts, so I'd intended to say nothing about the alternative Old Testament text – one which I'm sure you all know very well. But apart from my conversation with Michel, many things have happened recently to tell me that I couldn't ignore Noah and his Ark. I'd talked on it last May, just at the point when we were starting to come out of lockdown when the parallels of being cooped up and then liberated felt very significant. But here's the beauty of scripture: we're a year down the line, and new aspects of the story are coming to the fore. As the Book of Common Prayer puts it: "the Scripture moveth us in sundry places". The story of the Ark enriches and complements what we learn this morning about the first apostles in Acts and about Jesus as our Good Shepherd.

So what were those things that moved me to include Noah's story? First, Jane and I, with Jamie and Roxana spent several hours online last week at the Synod for the Archdeaconry of France, where a session was devoted to how we might become an "Eco Diocese". Then, on Monday, some of us were back on Zoom again for a Diocese in Europe conference entitled "Caring for Creation". World leaders met this week with Joe Biden to discuss how we are to deal with the huge challenges that face us. Not only has the British government just decided to bring forward its

climate change targets, General Synod has committed us as a Church to be Net Zero by 2030 – and this includes our own diocese. That's just nine years from now.

Environmental issues aren't solely limited to climate change and David Attenborough has done a much better job than I could ever do in flagging up the myriad problems we face, so I won't spend time telling you what you already know. Instead, let's look at what today's readings have to tell us about our responsibilities as stewards of God's creation. If you take another look at the story of the Ark after this service, you'll see that as God sets his bow in the clouds, He makes it a sign "*between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations ….. a sign of the covenant between me and the earth*" Genesis 9. 9-13. In the very first chapter of the Bible, God tells Adam that he will "*have dominion"* over all living things. God judges his creation as *good,* but we humans are to care for it. Genesis begins with creation, moves to a time of almost complete disaster for humankind, but then sees renewal through Noah and his descendants. As Ezekiel writes: "*Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Lord God. Wouldn't I prefer that he turn from his ways and live*?" Ezekiel 18.23. As we face challenges on so many fronts, what ways are we being called to turn from so that we may live?

In the online conference on Eco Diocese, we were reminded of the Anglican Communion's Five Marks of Mission. Perhaps we don't look at them enough:

The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

For Christians, caring for God's Creation is not an optional extra: it's God's work. We know how *unjust structures* and unsustainable living are multiplying the problems we face. As John Rogerson says in his commentary on The Flood: *Part of the order of creation is also the moral order, and the Old Testament is clear that*

disruption of the moral order can affect the natural order; which is why God brings the flood upon the earth; to destroy the destructive creature, humanity, whose evil undermines the created order.

These are hard words – but God does forewarn the righteous Noah, and through this one obedient man, who endured all the taunts of his scoffing neighbours, humanity is preserved. Perhaps in recent years, too many of us have been more like the disciples in the days following the crucifixion. But look at them in today's reading from Acts: they're quite transformed. They've left their self-imposed isolation and are out on the streets, speaking openly and healing in Jesus' name. Although prisoners, they stand confidently in front of the High Priest and his priestly clique, ready to declare loud and clear that their work is being done in the name of Jesus. Not only that, fearless Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, is ready to rebuke them for having crucified our Lord: This Jesus is "*the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone*". Are we ready, like them, to say *Rulers of the people and elders* – things have to change, and ready, in the name of Jesus, to bring healing to a sick world. Are we ready, like Noah, to go out on a limb from all those who don't seem to care and say, "No, we'll do what God is asking us to do"?

Many ideas were floated in the Eco Diocese conference about the practical steps we might all take. One which struck me was plans to co-operate with *Climate Stewards,* an organization aiming to offset by doing positive good – for example, providing smokeless stoves to people in rural Nepalese communities. People die from carbon monoxide poisoning. The need to collect wood – hard, physical work - often prevents children from going to school and at the same time it's causing real environmental damage. A simple step like that responds *to human need by loving service* whilst striving *to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.* I've put a link to the *Climate Stewards* website below. There are so many ways we can, are, and will be contributing to change. We know what personal steps we're taking to change our own behaviour, so let's be proud of that and determine to go further. This morning we might have read from 1 John, Chapter 3 instead of Genesis. He writes:

> "*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses*

help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him". 1 John 3. 16-24.

The Lord is our Good Shepherd. Of his own accord, he has laid down his life for us – his love is *love in truth and action*. The French love to talk about *solidarité* but this is infinitely more. We must never give in to the negativity of "Life's just too complex now. We've gone beyond the point of no return". Whatever we may face, our faith in him means that we can have total confidence that his *goodness and love will follow* us all the days of our lives.

So in that confidence and in faith, let's reflect on our mission as Church, serving the world in this present time. Who knows? Perhaps when, as a whole church, we *respond to human need by loving service*, when we work *to transform unjust structures of society, to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth,* when we speak truth and show it in action, our Christian voice will be heard loud and clear. As 1 John says: *we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*

Amen

https://www.climatestewards.org/

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 6th Sunday of Easter – 9th May 2021

Reader Jane Quarmby

Last week our Chaplain Jamie preached powerfully on unconscious bias, which can lead to racism, and more generally the exclusion of anyone who isn't white and male, or who is from any sort of minority group. Following the report of the Archbishops' Anti-Racism Task Force, this week our own Diocese issued a strong report on racism within the church itself. This report was circulated with the newsletter and some paragraphs stood out for me:

"In our church context it is seen in the glaring under-representation and exclusion in decision making at both local church committee and higher synodical levels. It is also seen in the demeanour, disregard, and disrespect as well as the lack of sensitivity based on skin colour that often devalue meetings and honest conversations. One can point to a lack of greater intentionality in addressing issues concerning discrimination on the basis of race on the one hand; and on the other hand to the 'inclusion' of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people as token and exotic (a kind of well-meaning racism). What is lacking is whole-hearted welcome to leadership and decision making. What is needed is space and value for the contributions and perspectives of People of Colour. Are we ready to see the potential in the other and prepared to share responsibility? Are we able to recognise the potential in the other and delegate responsibility? Are we equally ready to sacrifice our own place at the table in order to welcome another?

The Archbishop of Canterbury has issued an apology for deep rooted racism within the Church of England, and for not doing enough about it, urgently enough. There's now a Working Group looking at the whole issue and we in our chaplaincies are urged to get to grips with what is acknowledged as an unacceptable position.

When we look at the Church of England, the figures alone are startling:
"There is no Diocesan Bishop from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic community. In the 42 dioceses there is only 1 Cathedral Dean and only 3.9 per cent of the 7700

clergy are from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people (see ministry statistics published in 2019). There is a worrying and visible lack of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic representation in all synodical bodies. A feature of chaplaincy councils and diocesan decision-making boards and committees is the underrepresentation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people. Underrepresentation is further painfully evident in senior leadership. The Working Group is aware that the Diocese in Europe is blessed with a Bishop and an Archdeacon from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic community. However, there is a lack of representation of People of Colour as Cathedral Deans, Area Deans, Canons, Chaplains and Licensed Readers."

If we look at our chaplaincy, we don't have any Black, Asian and Minority people on our Ministry Team, or many as officers of the Council. We need to work towards changing this, not least in reaching out to the different communities across our area, showing how we can be a place of welcome to all.

Thinking of this reminded me of when Garry and I visited Australia two years ago and on the Sunday afternoon we were taken to a suburb of Melbourne. We had no idea what to expect when we drove up to an enormous leisure centre. The place was packed to overflowing with people, very tall, slender, and beautifully dressed, the men in smart suits and ties despite the heat, the ladies in gorgeous evening gowns, and children in their best clothes zipping about. We felt very scruffy indeed, as we'd just been spending a happy day exploring the Botanical Gardens so were a long way from being smartly dressed. But we were welcomed like long lost lambs, pulled in, given a drink and plonked at a table to eat home made food. Our hosts were refugees from Africa, from the Dinka tribe, who have made their way in numbers to this part of Australia. Fervent Christians, Anglicans, they were overcome with joy after a lot of hard work and fundraising, to have the Bishop there that day to license their very own priest and to inaugurate this place as their church. They are still working hard to raise funds to build their own church. Their joy, energy and excitement were palpable – and infectious.

Now that morning we'd been to a communion service at a big church not far away which was nowhere near full. We learnt that the Dinka had not been made welcome at their local Anglican church – far too enthusiastic about worship, so they'd been forced to look elsewhere. Empty churches for small white congregations, a huge sports hall full of fervent black worshippers, three choirs,

prayer was everywhere. What a waste of an opportunity – and an indictment of the church.

In the midst of this flurry of activity and words, come this Sunday's readings – from Acts at the end of the chapter about Peter being shown by the Holy Spirit that all people, whether Gentile or Jew, are to be given the good news about Christ and where the Holy Spirit is seen to fall upon Cornelius, a Roman (and therefore Gentile) and his household, and from the Gospel of John, where Jesus tells his disciples "Love each other".

Now Peter is being given firm instructions that all are welcome thanks to Christ. He goes to the house of Cornelius, an officer in the occupying Roman Army no less, and welcomes him, his family and household into the new Christian church and baptises them to the astonishment of some of his colleagues. An extraordinary thing for Peter to do. But he is following in Jesus' footsteps, and listening to the Holy Spirit. He welcomes into fellowship with him all who wish to receive the good news of Christ.

Jesus said we should love each other. What does that really mean? Perhaps it's easier to look at what it doesn't mean and its nicely summed up by these words from a song writer called Godfrey Birtill:

When I look at the blood
All I see is love, love, love.
When I stop at the cross
I can see the love of God
But I can't see competition
I can't see hierarchy
I can't see pride or prejudice
or the abuse of authority
I can't see lust for power
I can't see manipulation
I can't see rage or anger
or selfish ambition

I can't see unforgiveness
I can't see hate or envy

I can't see stupid fighting
or bitterness, or jealousy.
I can't see empire building
I can't see self-importance
I can't see backstabbing
Or vanity or arrogance.
I see surrender, sacrifice, salvation,
humility, righteousness, faithfulness, grace, forgiveness
Love Love Love.....
When I Stop!....at the cross
I can see the love of God.

Perhaps to this we should add the words "I can't see racism, bigotry, xenophobia or homophobia".

God made us all in his own image, Christ died for us all, the Good News is for all, regardless of where we were born or the colour of our skin. We need to all play our part in welcoming everyone to our church, perhaps having a good hard look at ourselves and our attitudes and even sometimes think about giving up our own place at the table to others. We are Christ's church; we all need to pay our part in making it a rainbow church.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 7th Sunday of Easter (Sunday after Ascension Day) – 16th May 2021

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

One of my favourite cantatas by Bach is *Vergnügte Ruh'* (Contented rest, beloved pleasure of the soul) – It is the perfect music for these troubled times, I thought the other day, while knowing that, after being immersed in a landscape of peace and bliss, this cantata will transport me into a lament of pain and sorrow, that culminates with an impassioned rejection of the world:

The world, that house of sin,
Brings nought, but hellish lyrics forth,
And seeks, through hate and spite,
The devil's image e'er to cherish. […]
Who should wish, indeed,
To live here,
When only hatred and hardship
Is the answer to love?
I'm sick and tired of living,
So take me, Jesus, [to the heavenly Zion].

The longed-for flight to Jesus' dwelling is not to happen as and when the disciples wish. You have just heard Jesus say, 'As you [my Father] have sent me into the world, so I have sent <u>them</u> into the world'. And yet, he has acknowledged 'they do not belong to the world, just as [he does] not belong to the world'.

Let us put today's Gospel reading into context. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus gave the disciples the new commandment of love, prepared them for his departure, and warned them of the world's hatred. He then then prayed for them, for their unity and protection in a world that will reject them. Through his words, Jesus drew the disciples into his relationship with God the Father.

This is somewhat of a paradox: the disciples are sent into a world to which they do not belong and that will prove hostile. Jesus wants to convey something urgent about the

world in his prayer: we have heard the word – cosmos in the Greek original – no less than thirteen times.

So what is this world? It cannot be the universe, as we know it, part of God's generous Creation. Is it human society organised as it sees best to promote its own purposes? Culture? The human ordering of things that causes suffering and oppression and cruelty and greed? Yet this is the world that God loves: 'For God so loved the world …'

If the world is so 'difficult' an entity, why does it exist, after all? And how does it exist? God is infinite, how is there (and why should there be) room for anything else? In the 16th century, Rabbi Isaac ben Solomon Luria had a radical answer, a doctrine known as '*tzimtzum'*, which means contraction, self-effacement, withdrawal. God, Luria said, contracted into himself to leave a space for the world. The Hebrew word for universe is '*olam'* and comes from a root that also means hiding, concealment. The creation of the world (the cosmos) and of humankind is an act of self-effacement, an act of love. But God could not leave the world devoid of his presence. 'For God so loved the world … that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.' (John 3.16-17)

The disciples are caught in the tension between "out of the world" and "in the world". This is a difficult place to be. St Paul told us, 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.' (Romans 12.2). Yet, the world, as he knew it, has not improved and we are even more entrapped in it than Jesus' disciples were.

Indeed, the 21st century confronts humanity with challenges of a scale and scope that seem to defy solution. The problems are vast, interconnected and global, they lie beyond the reach of even the most powerful states. Living in the here and now, how can we reconcile an honest assessment of the world around us with our faith?

The greatest danger facing Western societies today is the sense of powerlessness, of problems too great to solve and hatred too deep to cure. This is all too easily manipulated by those hungry for power. Fear can be a vehicle to harness anger, violence, xenophobia, or end in capitulation and defeatism. In the words of the poet W. B. Yeats:
"The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity." (*The Second Coming*)

How then can we make a difference? We are no more than a grain of sand on the seashore. We want to help, but there is all too little any of us can do.

Under such pressure, one can attempt to create a 'safe' space, to seek salvation within a closed community or within the self.

The question of the relationship between Christianity and the world has been an enduring one. Christian perplexity in this area has been perennial. Should Christians not withdraw from the sinful world to maintain their holiness? Over nearly 2000 years, thousands of groups and individuals have felt compelled to do it. One can all too easily be tempted to pass judgement on them, as being inwardly turned and selfishly preoccupied with their own saintliness, while condemning the world.

I have a special fondness for St Simeon Stylites, who lived atop a pillar, exposed to the elements, for 37 years. He had wanted to escape the popular veneration that his reputed miracle-working brought upon him. However, visitors continued to be drawn to him, to seek spiritual counsel, cure from sickness, justice for the oppressed. His seeming contempt for present existence was paired with great concern for humankind.

Jacques de Besancon : Legenda aurea by Jacobus de Voragine c. 1480-1490
Bibliotheque nationale de France

There is an image of the Ascension I want to share with you, and it was one that was rather widespread in the 15th and 16th century. Jesus's feet are about to disappear and the disciples are looking up towards heaven. At the centre of the picture, on the top of a mound, one can see Christ's footprints. This motif might have appeared in art when pilgrimages to the Church of the Ascension, on the Mount of Olives, were no longer possible. This church had been built in the 4th century around a slab of stone believed to be imprinted with Jesus's right foot, as he ascended into heaven.

The footprints in the illumination are symbolic of the reality of Jesus's life on earth, of his Resurrection, and of his Ascension. And of the world being stamped as the locus of God's saving love.

In his Ascension, Christ invited his disciples to enter into a new relationship with him that will no longer depend on his physical presence but will rely on trusting in his love and growing into the people and the community that he has called them to become in the world. It is time for them to continue his transforming work in the world. We are to live in this world embracing eternal life with our feet firmly planted on this earth.

The words of St Teresa of Avila are very often quoted – and rightly so: "Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out on a hurting world, yours are the feet with which he goes about doing good; yours are the hands with which he is to bless now."

We will not be saved from the world, we are not meant to withdraw or sit in judgment. We are sent to walk in Jesus's steps and to be his 'imprint' on the world, to make visible his presence and action. We are sent into the world to witness to the gift of eternal life, a life in which we recognise God's work and where we embody his love made known to us in the Word made flesh. Indeed, God's world and God's Eternity cannot be separated, as the Hebrew word *olam* shows it: it means both universe and eternity.

In the Eastern Churches, when the Divine Liturgy is about to begin, the deacon exclaims to the priest: 'It is time for the Lord to act.' The Liturgy is only one of the crucial moments when our lives intersect with Eternity. We are sent into the world to witness to the glimpses of Eternity and let them nourish our lives. Like the apostle Matthias, we can live an unspectacular life of discipleship, that won't make headlines, and still make a difference. Our task is to heal this fractured world.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Trinity Sunday – 30th May 2021

Canon David Pickering

The opening words of this morning's Gospel: *Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher come from God.'* Subtext: But what are you up to? Who are you? What's your game? Today the Church calls us to celebrate the Holy Trinity. Nicodemus was clearly puzzled about Jesus, but we may well be equally unsure when we try to understand the Holy Trinity.

In one of my parishes I had a very faithful and devout Churchwarden, Peter. Every year he'd tell me he found it difficult to come to Church on Trinity Sunday. *' I just can't get my head around it',* he'd say. Then and now I still very much sympathise with him. But in our conversations, he'd share with me how he viewed his manual work at Tube Investments, in Chesterfield. For him, he was taking part in God's creative activity. Then, his devotion to Our Lord was seen in weekly attendance at the Eucharist. If he was on a Sunday shift, he'd receive communion after Evensong. And he knew about and exemplified the Holy Spirit in his life as seen in the way he lived the fruits of the Spirit in his family, his work, and his commitment to the local church and the surrounding community. ***There*** was, and still is, I'm sure, the reality

of the Holy Trinity in the life of one very ordinary, and yet extraordinarily impressive person.

The word Trinity occurs nowhere in the Bible but expressions of the Trinity run right through Scripture. Biblical scholars see allusions to the Trinity in the Old Testament. In the creation narrative in Genesis 1.26 we read: *Then God said, Let **us** make humankind in **our** image, according to **our** likeness.* When Abraham met God at the oaks of Mamre, *He looked up and saw **three men** standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground* (Genesis 18. 1&2). Then in today's Old Testament reading we have the beatific vision of Isaiah with those wonderful words, *' Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'* Isaiah 6.3 - thus our opening hymn this morning.

In the New Testament we find two very clear Trinitarian formulas, the first, interestingly at the conclusion of St Matthew's Gospel*: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the **Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*** (Matthew 28.19) Also at the end of St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, we read: *The grace of the **Lord Jesus Christ,** the love of **God** and the communion of the **Holy Spirit** be with you all (*2 Corinthians 13.13).

And, of course, the four gospels are full of the actions of, and allusions to the persons of the Holy Trinity. Jesus makes innumerable references to his Father and promises the gift of the Holy Spirit. The activity of the Holy Trinity permeates the entire New Testament and, if we prayerfully reflect in our reading of scripture, we

can equally see this in the Old Testament. The Old can only be fully understood in the light of the New. It anticipates the fulfilment of its promises.

In the New Testament we see the Father Creator God, the earthly Divine Jesus who brings salvation and the life-giving Holy Spirit, so where in the Old Testament can we see the Trinity at work? We see God the Father especially in Genesis wherever there is creation. We see our Redeemer at work wherever there is salvation, rescue, redemption and reconciliation. And the presence of the Spirit (wind or breath - the Hebrew word *ruach* covers all three words) runs throughout, moving on the waters at the creation and breathing life into the dry bones in Ezekiel. With eyes of prayer we see the Triune God engaged in creation, salvation and the life of the spirit.

The word 'Trinity' first occurred in Greek, the written language of the New Testament and the Post Apostolic Church. We read about *Trias* in the later part of the second century in the writings of St Theophilus of Antioch. The first occurrence in Latin was in the writings of Tertullian in the early part of the second century. It was St Augustine, in the early part of the fifth century who wrote his great tome *De Trinitate.* But the tale is told that as he was writing it, one day he met a young boy by the sea shore who was bringing water from the sea and pouring it into a hole in the sand. When Augustine asked what was he doing the boy replied, 'Emptying the sea into this hole.' Augustine asked the boy how he could empty such a large ocean into a small hole. The boy (who was an angel in disguise) said, 'How can you understand the doctrine of the Holy Trinity with your finite human mind?' If we try to understand, rationalise or comprehend the Trinity then we'll be leading ourselves into a delusion. We shall only know the full reality of the Trinity when we

are finally united with our triune God, beyond our life in this present physical existence.

When I think about it, I had an introduction to the Trinity at quite an early age. In the days when the Book of Common Prayer was the only form of worship, I was around ten or eleven years old. When our village Rector was away on holiday, a Lay Reader would lead Morning Prayer in place of the 10.30 Sung Eucharist and if it was a certain saint's day, the Apostles' Creed could be replaced with the ***Quicunque Vult.*** The what! It was also known as the Athanasian Creed, though was written three or four centuries after Saint Athanasius. On one such Sunday I was walking home with a friend, John, who kept quoting lines like, *But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal. . . . . .The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible: and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal: and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals: but one eternal. . . . .So the Father is God, the Son is God : and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods: but one God.* John told me he had learnt these lines instead of listening to the sermon.

Probably a couple or more decades later, after I was ordained, I was invited back to preach in my boyhood village of Narborough in Leicestershire. And there in All Saints Church was John in the congregation with his teenage girl friend, now his wife. I didn't ask him if he could still quote lines from the *Quicunque Vult*. But it's worth a read as a prayerful reflection on the mystery of Holy Trinity. If you have an old Prayer Book, it comes just after Morning and Evening Prayer, and before The

Litany. The text is also online at *The Creed of S.Athanasius l The Church of England* and an nine minute sung version is available.

But perhaps we might be wiser to look for simpler explanations of the Trinity. When Saint Patrick was challenged that it was contrary to reason that God could be One and Three, he pointed to the threefold leaf of the shamrock, explaining that it was both three in one sense and one in another.

What is important for us is not how we try to comprehend or even start to understand the full nature of the Holy Trinity. Instead we should be seeking to live the life of the Trinity. Living the Trinity is in creating, in our own lives and the lives of others, what is good and enhancing, caring for and preserving this planet that God has given us for our earthly transient home. Living the Trinity is continuing Jesus Christ's redeeming work, in bringing healing, reconciliation, justice and peace to our divided and troubled world. Living the Trinity is having the fruits of Spirit as the motivating force of all that we do. They are the Trinity's living power of God in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.

Amen.

Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon

6th June 2021
1st Sunday after Trinity

Reflection

Last Sunday we looked at what the Trinity is and how hard it is to explain how anyone can be three in one. We humans need labels, don't we, so that we can neatly file things away in our understanding. It's hard for us to accept when something or someone can't be labelled and absorbed into our system. It's a basic human tendency - once something has a name then we know where to put it and what to do with it.

We see this illustrated very clearly in our Gospel reading from Mark. Firstly we have Mary and her family, the brothers and sisters of Jesus, trying to take him away from what he is doing – preaching and healing and casting out demons, so busy he and his followers don't even have time to eat because there are just so many people needing help. Why? Because he isn't now doing what they expect of him. He isn't living up to the label of oldest son and all that being the oldest son entails. He should be at home with them, playing an active role in their business, possibly even running it now. We don't know what happened to Joseph, but it's assumed that by the time Jesus reached 30, Joseph had died. Traditionally the oldest son would by now be the centre of the family, not running around with a bunch of oddbods from all walks of life. He's not a rabbi or a teacher, he's a carpenter from a small town. They don't know what's going on and want him to pack all this daftness in and come home. One wonders why the people who have been closest to him all his life up until now don't recognise what they have in their midst. Are they genuinely worried about him, thinking he's mad, or are they angry that he's not at home looking after them? Has Mary forgotten the angels who visited her and Joseph and told her how special a child Jesus would be? We'll never know.

If his family is cross, the religious teachers are even more put out by what he's doing. They can't explain Jesus. How does he know all that he teaches, he hasn't done their training or been accredited by them? He isn't part of their system, doesn't live like them or think like them, he is an outsider. They can't do what he can do – they can try to heal someone all day but it isn't going to happen – not like this man who is healing everyone who asks. To them he's someone who, because he does not conform to their thinking or system, needs to be side-lined. He needs a label which makes him less important, easier to control or contain, easier to get rid of. Tom Wright in his book "Mark for Everyone" gives an example of how easily people give labels to each other and the consequences of doing that. He was watching a demonstration on the television news which quickly turned violent. He says "The close-up TV shots, and the recordings of what people were saying at the time, made it clear what had happened. The police had decided that the demonstrators were "scum". The demonstrators had decided that the police were "pigs". Once they had labelled them like that, they could do what they liked. They were no longer dealing with humans, but with animals, and dirty ones at that. Raise the stakes, stick a label on people, and then it doesn't matter what you do and who you hurt." Very quickly Tom Wright saw a demonstration turn into a pitched battle.
And it's still going on all over the world – labelling people because you fear them, don't understand them, or they aren't like you. We can all come up with examples of abuse – due to some-one's colour, where they were born, the colour of their skin, how they live, their sexuality, the list goes on. It starts early with children – like many others I was called "4 eyes" at school because I wore glasses and no-one else did in my class. But adults make it more serious as we see in so many ways and it inevitably leads to misery and violence.

The religious teachers couldn't think of anything better to say about Jesus than if he was doing all this casting out of demons then he must be one himself, in league with the Devil. They couldn't look at him and his actions with open minds, or accept that he was doing God's work, that his power of exorcism and healing was coming from God. It must, they decided, be a bad thing. Jesus is of course far too mature and clever to stoop to their childish name calling and destroys their argument with flawless logic. If they were right, then the devil was fighting himself and that can only end in disaster for the devil. It's the end of his kingdom. A nation at war with itself ends up destroying itself. If a family unit starts fighting amongst themselves, it's the end of that family unit as many divorces prove.

Unknown to themselves, though, the teachers have opened the way for Jesus to point out that, although the Devil is strong, someone has arrived who is even stronger. To burgle a strong man you must first overpower him and tie him up – and that is what Jesus is doing with the Devil. Jesus is stronger and will defeat the Devil even in his own house. He adds a warning though – if anyone labels the work of the Holy Spirit as being that of the Devil, they are committing blasphemy. That will not be forgiven, and this is a very strong statement from Jesus. Today, as then, we need to decide for ourselves if Jesus was God made man, or not. Was he divine and human - or just someone from the history books?

Having dealt with the religious teachers, Jesus now must deal with his family - Mary and her other sons send Jesus a message which is relayed to him by the crowd, who alert him to the fact that his family is outside and looking for him. And Jesus's response is not what anyone would have expected. It's a surprise perhaps to us reading the passage now when he says that the crowd around him are his sisters and brothers, and anyone who does God's will! Doesn't he love and care about his mother and siblings? How could he put strangers before them? Nowadays we are used to families being separated by distance, moving a long way away from your parents and others in your family is quite usual these days – we are probably all good examples of this. Our family is scattered across the globe with members in Britain, France, Australia, and New Zealand. When children grow up, they usually leave home and strike out on their own. But this isn't the case in many non-Western cultures where the family stays together in a very tight knit community, living and working together, often in the same house. For those listening to Jesus it would have been shocking to leave your family like he had done, the height of disloyalty. No wonder the family thought him mad and wanted to drag him back home before he brought any more dishonour to the family name. But Jesus is on a very different path now, a path that will turn upside down the "normal" that everyone took for granted. He is creating a new family in God and is cutting through relationships and family ties.

This is a hard message from him – to leave your loved ones and follow him. It calls for difficult sacrifice. When we have a nice cosy life enjoying time spent with our children, grandchildren, parents, brothers and sisters, how many of us would be willing to give that up to follow the way of Jesus? To replace our loved ones with strangers who are perhaps very different from us? There are those who do, and I am in awe of those in our own congregation who have done just that. Listening to the testimonies over Lent from people who are missionaries or charity workers in some of the most dangerous places in the world, was very humbling. Our chaplain Jamie gave up his life in England to come here and minister to us. Jesus and his call to follow him cuts right through our lives and our worlds. It's a massive challenge to us, to put God first in our lives, before everything and everyone else, to embrace a new family in God. But we all need to be loved, cherished, and welcomed – and that is what awaits us if we tap at God's door and ask to be one of his children.

Amen.

Jane Quarmby, Reader

Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille with Aix-en-Provence and the Luberon

13th June 2021
2nd Sunday after Trinity

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

Reflection

I'm very much a city person. I've lived most of my life in apartments, with little, if any, opportunity to grow anything but potted plants. As a child, I delighted in planting beans in a little soil and watching them grow within a few days. I cannot remember a single occasion when I failed. Those little things are certainly equipped with a drive to germinate and grow! All they need is a bit of water to give them impetus.

But here ends the story of my plant growing success. I am sure many of you have green fingers. Not me. Seeds, smaller or bigger, pips, pits, plant cuttings, bulbs – they all resist my tender loving care. I am pleased and grateful when someone brings me a potted plant and pray that it will survive until their next visit. Proof of my good will and dedication.

There are, however, a number of plants in my apartment, and some of them have been there for several years. Though I cannot claim I have looked after them well. When I forget to water them or I am away for as long as a week, they seem to thrive. When I am around and pamper them, they look utterly bored and invite an excessive variety of pests to keep them company and to confront me with the moral conundrum of exterminating the beasties.

Therefore, I take great comfort in the two parables of the Kingdom that Jesus told his disciples: the earth produces of itself, seeds sprout and grow while the sower sleeps and rises, and a tiny seed morphs into the greatest of all shrubs. A gardener's dream comes true. And yet this is counter-cultural for professional gardeners and even for part-time ones! So, what does Jesus mean when he says that the planter does not know how all this happens? It is important to follow the biological development of the seed, the process of germination, and also to facilitate and to manage it. We all want to plan outcomes, to be in control! We want to understand how things work and to take action accordingly.

Jesus' parables cannot but clash with our philosophy of life. He tells parables not for explanation, but for exploration. Not for answers, but to engage with imagination, and to re-order conventional assumptions and values. They provide a rich and powerful lesson, not

always easy to discern. Indeed, God uses symbols to address us, and the Western mind has lost much of its understanding of symbolic language and the appreciation of it through an obsession with clear-cut and efficient structures.

We have, probably, also lost much of the sense of wonder that people who listened to Jesus two thousand years ago had. They could hold the paradoxical elements of the parables, as they bowed down before the miracles in their daily life. Where we analyse the activity of the metabolic machinery of a dormant seed resulting in its germination, they have seen the mystery of life out of death, and miracle upon miracle in the growth of a seedling and its developing into a large shrub.

Let us suppose that a parable of a plant developing out of the tiniest whisper of a beginning, could provide a worthy image for the growth of God's Kingdom: don't you think that a mustard plant is a rather diminutive metaphor? It seems to easily rime with hiddenness and insignificance. On the other hand, Ezekiel's poetic vision about the restoration of a Davidic kingdom as a tender sprig that becomes a noble cedar has greatness and solemnity. Perhaps that is exactly what Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom that has drawn near calls for. It's a theme that breathes through all of Mark's Gospel.

No doubt, a shrub, as sizeable as it may be, is lowlier and less majestic than a cedar. Yet remember that the greatness of God's reign will be established through humility and lowliness: it stoops to wash feet, it kneels by wounded strangers on the side of the road. It is lifted up not on a throne, but on a cross. A kingdom of power in weakness, of greatness in meekness.

By now, we have well understood, that this kingdom is not a static place, yet the dynamic reality of God's presence and power within the creation and within the lives of God's people. The parables in Mark's Gospel do not promise its unhindered progress. But they insist that the new order Jesus announces through his words and deeds will not be confined to certain spheres. Tiny seeds are easily carried by the wind, so the plant will grow where it will.

We have learned to genetically alter the seed, so that it is healthier and more resilient, so that it grows more easily and produces more. We have sophisticated resources to till the earth, test the soil, keep weeds and pests at bay. How does the reign of God grow? How does it sprout and flourish in the life of an individual person, or a church, or in the community and the world around us? If only we could figure that out, we could break it down into a process and form a strategy. The frame of reference we live in is about having long-term plans and goals, allocating resources, assessing results. Can we bring in the kingdom of God by our planning and striving? "The earth produces of itself", and the seed grows, we don't know how. Here we have a subtle reminder of God's hidden presence and power for those who like to take things into their own hands. Let God be in charge!

In our increasingly inhospitable world, how comforting it is to know that a humble mustard plant grows to provide space and opportunity for life to develop. Only God, the generous Host of us all, can offer, in his all-embracing gentleness, the shade of a shrub as a home for birds of all feathers. How many are longing to hear such an invitation today? 1% of the world's population have fled their homes as a result of persecution or conflict, and many more because of poverty, natural disaster, political unrest gang violence or other serious circumstances – where is the place of comfort and rest for them? The lowly shrub is big enough for birds of every kind to find a home.

We need to be careful not to read these parables as indicating a promise for the growth of the Church throughout the ages. The reign of God does not carve out a separate sacred space – it claims all aspects of human existence. Nevertheless, the church should be a sign of the Kingdom in the world, and its own growth should be in truth, love, justice and hospitality, not in numbers. If the Church doesn't provide sanctuary, sustenance, and renewal to those who need it, like little birds, then it is not the Gospel of the Kingdom that it preaches.

The secrecy and hiddenness that accompany the gospel of the Kingdom are no invitation to despair. Don't be surprised if the seeds we are given to plant look ineffective. We cannot make the kingdom happen by force of will. The ultimate emergence of the reign of God does not depend on our ingenuity.

These are parables of hope and promise, leading us to confess God's reign in the world and to share in its blessings. We should always be confident that God is working even when we are not looking, in ways that are mysterious and profound. We have to walk not by sight, yet by faith – faith that God is in the tiny seeds of life he scatters in the world and makes them grow.

And we should ceaselessly pray in a way that acknowledges and proclaims God's creative, redeeming and restoring presence: "Thy kingdom come!"

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 3rd Sunday after Trinity – 20th June 2021

Christine Portman, Reader

A few weeks, ago David and I were watching Brian Cox presenting "Aliens: Are we alone?" He was exploring the possibility that we humans are the sole form of intelligent life in the universe. Given the mess we seem to be in at the moment, perhaps "intelligent" might be taken with a pinch of salt - but that said, the programme raised some very interesting questions.

Professor Cox talked about the endosymbiotic theory of evolution: the idea is that complex life emerged from the primeval swamps when an aerobic bacterium was accidentally engulfed by another, larger anaerobic version. What struck him about this theory was the idea that a single, accidental and almost inconceivably rare event could possibly have given rise to an evolutionary chain which in turn led to the emergence of human beings on Earth. The chance of this happening elsewhere in the universe seems to be microscopically small. Perhaps the answer to the programme's title might be, "Yes, we are alone".

Nowadays it's not only *"Those who go down to the sea in ships and ply their trade in great waters"* who "*see the works of the Lord and his wonders in the deep".* Biologists and particle physicists also marvel at the wonders of this universe - though perhaps not too many are ready to "*give thanks to the Lord for his goodness and the wonders he does for his children"*. In looking at today's first reading I was struck by how so many of us are like Job: overly sure that we have life sorted out. But God confronts Job's self-assurance – and I make no apology for re-reading from that powerful passage:

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Job was petrified by God's sudden appearance - he must have been trembling before him:
Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.
Then follows a series of impossible questions:

'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

'Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb?—
when I made the clouds its garment,
and thick darkness its swaddling band,
and prescribed bounds for it,
and set bars and doors,
and said, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stopped"?

These are wonderful questions – and around 2,800 years later, our greatest minds are still seeking many of the answers. In his commentary on the final chapters of Job, John Rogerson writes: *"…. humans are not able to see things from God's viewpoint. They would not be able to make any sense of reality even if they could. This means that while the human quest for knowledge and for answers to the most perplexing questions of human existence must never be discouraged, humans must never forget that the represent a tiny speck in an immeasurable universe; and that God deals compassionately with humans in spite of their inhumanity to each other."*

At the end of the Book of Job, having listened to God, the prophet realizes his limitations:

Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know……

My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you
Therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes."

I had a conversation recently that made me reflect a good deal on the nature of faith. I was speaking to a woman who regularly comes to services, recites the Creed, takes the sacrament. I'd naturally assumed she was Christian. But I began to wonder. "I don't believe Jesus knew he was going to have to die", she said. "He was just like all the other people who've given their lives to help others - he simply committed himself, right to the end. Yes, he died, but all the other stuff was just made up after the event". There was a terrible certainty in the way she said this: one that left no room for argument, and no room for the mystery of God or doubt of the correctness of *her* perceptions.

Now Brian Cox says that he has 'no personal faith', yet he doesn't like being labelled an atheist. His enquiring mind leaves space for searching for the truth. We just heard today's gospel story: Jesus calms the storm and the disciples say: *'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?*' How did you react as you listened? Does this account have any basis in fact, or is this a mythical or symbolic story that had built up over the last 30-40 years since his crucifixion? Why did Mark put it in his, the earliest gospel? Do you believe this is a story written down to create faith?

We can never definitely know what happened on that day - but we can reflect on what it reveals about faith. Let's look again at words from the end of the reading:

A great gale arose, and the waves beat the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'

Jesus had been fast asleep in the boat, untroubled upon a stormy sea. Unlike the disciples, he was at peace, fully confident, trusting in God. What's interesting is that even after he had stilled the storm (and you'd think that the sudden 'dead

calm' would have been enough to convince any of them!) the disciples are still afraid: *'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'* Jesus has just saved them all from perishing, but now their fear is compounded with awe.

In last week's reading from 2 Corinthians, St Paul declared: "*we walk by faith, not by sight*". Christians have confidence in Jesus because *"even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way"*. Faith in Jesus as the Christ is a leap in the dark, a willingness to trust what has been made known to us through his life, death and resurrection. Faith changes everything: *"if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"*

Reading on today, in chapter 6, Paul talks of all the hardships he's suffered to spread the gospel. How disappointing and frustrating it must have been to arrive in Corinth, to what seems to have been a pretty lukewarm reception: *"We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us".* Nevertheless, Paul's faith has completely changed him. His passion for spreading the word remains intact: *"As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also"*.

Accepting Christ shouldn't be a half-hearted affair, he says: faith in Jesus Christ our Saviour should work fundamental change in us. Paul reminds them: what they have received has come through God's grace. It's not something to be taken lightly. These aren't philosophical notions we can set aside to look at later. No, says, Paul: the time to change to a life directed by faith is here and now: *"As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. …. I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation."*

Paul saw those Corinthians hadn't really changed; they'd failed to open their hearts to God. They had no solidity, no real trust. Being open to God brings a faith that keeps us steady, *"living in in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love".* Others may see us as "*having nothing*". In reality, with faith, we possess "*everything"*.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 6th Sunday after Trinity

11th July 2021

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

It was an unspeakable act. The act of a weak bully. It has fascinated artists, musicians and authors, competing to see how gruesome they can make the description of the scene. John the Baptist's head on a platter.

Our Gospel passage is a study in human weakness - one might say, human reality. Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great who attempted to kill Jesus at birth, has been given authority to rule in Galilee by the occupying forces of imperial Rome. He has a semblance of power, but is in practice despised as a puppet king under Roman rule. Mark's portrayal of Herod shows someone in public life apt to make promises on which they cannot deliver, relying on bravado to see them through.

Herod has married his brother's wife. This was prohibited under the Law, and John has called it out as an illegal act. Herod then finds himself conflicted. Herodias is livid with John for causing her shame (just about the worst that could befall anyone in that society) and wants him dead. Herod, deep down, knows John is right and finds his truth-telling somehow fascinating. Herodias has brought her daughter Salome into the household, an attractive young woman, and Herod at the end of a drunken evening will give her more or less anything if

she will dance for him. Herodias pounces on the opportunity, Herod is trapped by his weak bravado, and like a Greek tragedy the scene can only end one way. It is all too like the depressing scene in a garden with a snake where everyone tried to say it was someone else's fault.

Herod's weakness is further exposed when Mark writes that 'out of regard for his oaths and for the guests' he did not want to refuse his stepdaughter's outrageous request. He could have said, 'Don't be silly; ask for something appropriate'. We are left wondering if the real reason might not have been more banal: that he was afraid of losing face with Herodias, whom he would have to confront after the guests had gone, desperate for her affections and those of her daughter. Later in the Gospel, Mark will portray Pilate similarly caught between finding no guilt in Jesus yet 'wishing to satisfy the crowd'. Weakness in power. The opposite of what Paul identified in Jesus: power in weakness.

There is something else about this story which, in order to understand it, we need to know what comes before and afterwards. Two weeks ago we saw how Mark interposed one story within another, when the healing of Jairus's daughter was interrupted by the woman taking hold of Jesus's clothes seeking a cure for her illness. Mark uses the same narrative technique here. In the passage that comes immediately before today's reading, Jesus sends out the Twelve to proclaim repentance, cast out demons and cure the sick. 'King Herod heard of it,' we are told. Between the sending out of the Twelve and their triumphant return, Mark interposes this story of the death of John the Baptist. Just as the disciples are discovering the power of Jesus's teaching, in the midst of all the signs and wonders he is showing the crowds, Mark warns of the cost of

discipleship, that telling truth to power can come at a terrible price. It's a glimpse of how the story of Jesus will end. And John is, in practice, the first Christian martyr, dying for his witness to Christ even before Jesus's death.

In our Old Testament reading, the prophet Amos was faced with the same sort of decision, realising that something unpopular must be named to those in power (his prediction of the fall of the ruling dynasty). Yet he takes his stand, regardless of the cost. The reward for this kind of witness is that it places people within the very life of God that Jesus described, to which Paul in turn refers in his Letter to the church at Ephesus. The assurance that associating with Jesus has other consequences too, painted on a larger canvas. The assurance that the life of God is unstoppable, as the resurrection of Jesus has revealed.

John's death, in Matthew's account, has a marked effect on Jesus when he is told about it. He withdraws 'to a deserted place by himself'[1]. The news can only have sharpened his understanding of what must lie ahead, as he continues to follow the vocation he knows to be his, the vocation first revealed to him at his baptism by John[2]. He follows it all the way to Gethsemane and beyond: 'Father, … not what I want, but what you want'[3].

Vocation was very much the theme last Sunday, when representatives from our Diocese gathered in Milan for the ordination of four new priests, including our Curate Roxana. Bishop David Hamid spoke of the vocation of a priest in terms of a bridge. As Christ, the Great High Priest, is the bridge between heaven and earth, so priests in the Church are called to be bridges for people's prayer and

[1] Matthew 14.13
[2] Mark 1.9-11
[3] Mark 14.36

offering, bridges of reconciliation in the community and bridges out into the world.

There is something about the call of this Gospel on our lives that is compelling. Not only for those who discern a specific call to serve as priests or deacons, but for every single member of the Church. (Some denominations refer to this in terms of the 'priesthood of all believers'.) In each circumstance we encounter, the question asked of us is this: 'What does the Gospel require of me here, and now?' It may be being the first to say sorry when there has been an argument. Becoming agents of reconciliation - at home, at work, among friends or strangers. It may be being the one who steps in to help when everyone else feels helpless. Becoming the leaven in the bread. Influencing how something turns out, for better or worse. That's vocation. It's about call and response.

Or we can be like Herod. Too weak to stand up to evil and nastiness. Too concerned for our own comfort to disturb the status quo. Too preoccupied with ourselves to find time to be kind to others. Often, it's the little things that matter to other people. We know that, for they matter to us too.

When John sent a message to Jesus from prison, asking if he was the one who was to come, Jesus sent a message back: 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them'[4]. What a beautiful reply, even if it didn't answer John's question.

[4] Matthew 11.4-5

What would people say of us that they heard and saw? Is it possible that they might say: 'I don't know why she goes to church, but I do know I always feel better for seeing her'; 'I don't know what makes him cross the city on a Sunday to go to that service, but I do know that when I was in hospital he was the one who showed up'. 'I don't know why she bothers with religion but I do know that when my colleague was being bullied in the workplace, she was the one who stood up for her and brought about change.' 'I don't know why he does all that churchgoing, but I do know that he is passionate about human rights.' Agents of reconciliation. Leaven in the bread.

John died because a weak bully couldn't bring himself to stand up to nastiness and evil when it was in front of him. Within a short time, the same thing happened to Jesus. What are we going to do about it?

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 7th Sunday after Trinity

18th July 2021

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

"Sheep can safely graze where a good shepherd watches over them." (*Salomon Franck, from the libretto of the cantata BWV 208 by J S Bach*)

Through the centuries, many a ruler has taken pride in being called a shepherd of their people. We had here the testimony of a cantata Bach composed for the birthday of the duke of Sachsen Weissenfels – actually, the duke was more of a hunter than a shepherd, and certainly a particularly improvident ruler, one of those whom the prophet Jeremiah had vituperated.

In the ancient world, the shepherd was a common metaphor for leadership, whether human or divine. The epilogue of the law code of Hammurabi, king of Babylon eighteen centuries before Christ, has the monarch state: "I made the people lie down in safe pastures, I did not allow anyone to frighten them." An appropriate metaphor. After all, aren't shepherds responsible for protecting and providing sustenance for their flocks, keeping peace within the flock, defending it against attackers, searching for sheep who have gone astray, and rescuing those who are in danger?

I suspect we are, nowadays, a little uncomfortable with this metaphor (and that our political leaders would reject it altogether): we are not sure we want to be led as a shepherd would lead his flock, as we are suspicious of authority that cannot be contested. And, honestly, are any of us flattered to be thought of as sheep? In our "me first" culture, we want to be acknowledged for our individuality, for our uniqueness, not as anonymous members of a flock.

How many of us are, actually, familiar with shepherding? While shepherding is still widespread in many parts of the world, for us it is only a very remote reality, an old-fashioned picture on a post card or in a book with yellowed pages. A

somehow superficial reading of Psalm 23 might have contributed to our largely idyllic image of the shepherd.

Nonetheless, for many of us, this is the most cherished psalm. It delivers some of the most beautiful and deeply comforting images in the whole Bible. At its heart lie hope and reassurance. Green pastures, still waters and the very thought of "dwelling in the house of the Lord for ever" – here is strength and peace and delight and promise of eternal life.

But linger a little with the Psalm, and you will see that it speaks far more of journeying than of abiding in solitude, of enduring trials rather than escaping them, of life rather than afterlife, and of finding a place where one is welcomed to rest and be refreshed.

At the very centre of the Psalm, the psalmist acknowledges God's presence at the heart of his life: "you are with me". Up to this point God is spoken of in the third person, a remote presence: "The Lord is my shepherd, he leads me, he restores my soul". From now on, God is addressed directly: "you are with me, you spread a table, you have anointed my head …" The conversation begins, the relationship flourishes. "You are with me" is the turning point of the Psalm, and from here a new life with God begins, in the knowledge that "I will lack nothing". The immeasurable grace of God, the Shepherd, opens the door to the dwelling where one can come, all by oneself, to rest, to be transformed and to gain wholeness: "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." In the words of the poet T. S. Eliot:

"The end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time." (*Little Gidding*)

This year, as we read our way through Mark's Gospel – arguably, the fasted-paced of the four Gospels – we might feel breathless and plead for a little rest. Things happen fast in Mark's story, one event quickly follows another, time is short. The Greek word *eutheos*, translated "immediately" or "at once", occurs over 40 times in this Gospel. Mark creates a sense of hurry, of rush, of busyness. We encounter an efficient Messiah and a whirlwind of miracles, parables and life-changing conversations.

The sixth chapter of the Gospel is no exception: Jesus sends the twelve disciples on a mission; John the Baptist is killed; Jesus feeds the five thousand and walks

on water – all major events in the Gospel, so much so, that the two passages we read today seem a touch anticlimactic.

It is a striking shift to hear Jesus tell his disciples, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." The apostles have just returned to Jesus, bringing, no doubt, stories both of great blessing and of difficulties, if not of failures – there is an urgency, even an excitement, to share them with him, and Jesus calls them to a time and place of rest. He invites them to leave their troubles behind, to dwell in a place where they can pay attention to their hearts, to attend to the movements of their bodies, to have again a sense of themselves, and to anchor their lives in his presence: not doing but being. His compassion – this is what designates Jesus as Shepherd. A compassion that is not merely a human feeling, but God's deep tenderness made flesh.

In this place of rest, the Shepherd begins to form the disciples into a new flock, a new community, a new humanity – one of compassion, reconciliation and justice, one that is called to witness to God's Kingdom here, on earth, that is, to his reign of mercy and peace.

"Come away and rest a while" – there is both wisdom and love in these words. Nevertheless, honouring God's call to rest is no small feat for us, 21st century people. Our culture is one of being workaholic, of efficiency, of striving, of anxiety about wasting time, of perfectionism. Many wear their burnout as a badge of honour.

The 17th century French catholic priest Vincent de Paul, founder of the Lazarists, knew of the risk of this destructive drive: "It is a trick of the devil, which he employs to deceive good souls, to incite them to do more than they are able, in order that they may no longer be able to do anything."

Jesus can probe below the surface of our busyness and touch our longing, our hunger that we do not dare to name: a longing for time, solitude, rest, reflection, refreshment … To all those who cannot stop, who will not stop to ponder, to wonder, to meditate, to take a deep breath … Jesus says "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

One of the many joys of hiking I'm looking forward to this summer is that of coming across signs that people, who have longed to rest with God and in God, have left in my path: a prayer, a meditation or a blessing written on a rock or on the frontispiece of a house, the simplest cross on a mountain top, a tiny chapel…

Wherever you are called to leave what burdens you carry behind and take a rest, be it at home, or in a garden, in a church or on a beach, do not decline this precious opportunity for closeness to God, knowing that, in his presence, we can lack nothing.

Amen.

Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon

25th July 2021
8th Sunday after Trinity
St James the Apostle

Reflection

The words of Jesus at the conclusion and climax of this morning's Gospel passage. *Matthew 20. 26 – 28: It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

As we plod through the Green weeks of the Sundays after Trinity, it comes as a welcome change to celebrate an important saint's day on a Sunday. So this morning we rejoice in the commemoration of the apostle Saint James the Great. And I am sure that all of us across our chaplaincy rejoice in the name day of our chaplain, Jamie.

But who was James the Apostle? Perhaps we should be clear about which James we are commemorating today. In the New Testament there are references to four people named James.

Among the apostles there is James the Less, or the Younger, the son of Alphaeus (Mark 3.18). We know nothing else about him and his feast day is with the Apostle Philip on the 1st of May. (Pip and Jim Day!!)

Then, throughout the New Testament we have numerous references to James, 'the Lord's brother', who along with St. Peter became an early leader of the Church in Jerusalem (Mark 6.3, Matthew 13.55, Acts 1.14, 12.17, 15.17, 1 Corinthians 15.7, Galatians 1.19 - 2.12). He was put to death by the Sanhedrin in 62 or 69AD. Some traditions claim James the Less and James 'the Lord's brother' to be one and the same person, but there is no real evidence for this.

Then we have the Letter of James. Some scholars have claimed this was written by James, 'the Lord's brother'. But the style and clarity of the Greek would suggest this to be unlikely from a Galilean. Also the letter begins, 'James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ', with no claim of a brotherly relationship. Apart from the opening verses to chapters one and two, there is no direct reference to make its teaching distinctively Christian. Because of this, Martin Luther called it an 'Epistle of Straw'. However, it offers high moral teaching and encouragement in the face of persecution and other challenges of life. To quote its opening exhortation, *'My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature, lacking in nothing.'* (James 1.2-4)

Perhaps keeping these words from the Letter of James in mind, we can move on to the Apostle, James the Great, whose feast we celebrate today.

He and his brother, John, were the sons of Zebedee, in the family fishing business. But along with Peter and Andrew, in the same trade, they left their commercial interests to answer the call from Jesus to become ' fishers of people.' Such was James and his brother's commitment to Jesus that he later gives them the nicknames Boanerges - Sons of Thunder. James obviously belonged to the inner circle of the disciples, as along with his brother John, and Peter, he was close to Jesus at some of the key moments of his ministry. He was there in that extraordinary and exhilarating moment on the mountain of the Transfiguration witnessing the heavenly glory of Jesus in conversations with Moses and Elijah. By contrast he was one of the trio close to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, no doubt sharing in the pain and despair of Jesus' agonising prayer. In earlier happier times, as we heard in the gospel reading at the end of June, James, with the other two, was called by Jesus to witness the raising of the daughter of Jairus. Finally, John's gospel records the sons of Zebedee being there when the risen Jesus appeared to some of the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. (John 21.)

But then we have the strange event in today's gospel reading. The mother of James and John, probably out of love and motherly concern for her sons, naturally, and on her knees asks Jesus to give her boys the highest ranks in his kingdom. Interestingly, Mark's earlier gospel records the two disciples making the request themselves. (Mark 10.35 - 45) And here in Matthew, Jesus seems to address the disciples rather than giving a direct response to their mother.

Jesus' response to James and John, their mother, to the other disciples, and to us, is to move on towards a new reality. Being with Jesus, and following him, means not a life of honour, power and authority. Rather it may well mean drinking a bitter cup of difficulty or suffering. From today's reading from Acts we heard how James was beheaded by Herod Agrippa 1 in 44AD, and Peter has a narrow, albeit temporary escape by only being arrested. The following verses tell of his miraculous escape. James, along with so many Christians, shares with Jesus in drinking from the cup of suffering.

To everyone Jesus says that seeking positions of authority and power is a dangerous road which can lead to corruption and tyranny. Rather in the Christian life, in and for the Kingdom of God's rule, we are called to a life of service. This will, at times, be costly. For some it may have an ultimate cost as it did for Jesus. Following him will, as the letter of James says, bring times of trial and testing and call for endurance.

Today we celebrate and give thanks for the life of the Apostle James the Great. We pray that the example of his life of commitment to the ministry of Jesus will encourage us in our life of faith. That it will be a life of humility and service, that brings about the fullness and wholeness of life that Jesus paid for as a ransom for all people on the cross.

And finally, we give thanks and pray for our own James among us, as our Chaplain Jamie commits his life to priestly service among us.

Amen.

Canon David Pickering

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 10th Sunday after Trinity

8th August 2021

The Reverend Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

In the last three weeks, I have been thinking a lot about the prophet Elijah. It has been a time framed by significant church festivals related to the prophet.

I flew to Romania on the feast of the Holy and Glorious Prophet Elijah, as the Eastern Churches revere him. In the Eastern tradition, Elijah (sometimes also called the Thunderer) administering rain, thunder, lightning bolts and hail, is the protector of crops and patron of Air Forces. When thunder is heard, people say that Elijah is driving his chariot in heaven.

When I flew back on Friday, many Christian traditions were celebrating the Transfiguration, a meaningful appearance of Elijah in the gospel story – you might remember that Peter, James, and John saw Jesus speaking with Elijah and Moses on a mountain, at the time of the manifestation of Christ's glory. While waiting for my flight, I read one of the lessons set for Morning Prayer on the feast of the Transfiguration, from the Book of Ecclesiasticus: "Elijah arose, a prophet like fire, and his word burned like a torch. […] By the word of the Lord he shut up the heavens, and also three times brought down fire. How glorious you were, Elijah, in your wondrous deeds! Whose glory is equal to yours? […] You were taken up by a whirlwind of fire, in a chariot with horses of fire."

Elijah the prophet seems filled with divine energy, throughout his life. He was a prophet of unwavering fidelity to God's word, of uncompromising faith, which is encapsulated by his name that means "My God is Yahweh". I suspect he was not a very likeable character – after all, a prophet's calling is not to be agreeable – his life was strewn with conflict, it was an arduous journey filled with peril and terror.

I must admit that I generally don't linger on the drama of his life story, nor am I impressed by his pyrotechnics, as summarised by Ecclesiasticus. On the

contrary, this morning's reading is one of my favourite moments of Elijah's journey, together with two other vignettes. The three of them are instances of Elijah being fed. Quite unspectacular! But so meaningful. All three episodes happened during times of tribulation in the midst of Elijah's epic conflict with King Ahab, who was described as doing "evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him" (1 Kings 16:31), and his Phoenician wife Jezebel who wanted to convert Israel to worshipping the deities of her native land, and who threatened to execute all those who refused to do it.

On the first occasion, while in a hiding-place by a brook beyond the Jordan, Elijah was fed by ravens, who brought him bread and meat day and night. Later, when the brook dried up, God sent the prophet to Zarephath, in hostile Phoenician territory, to a widow awaiting death from starvation. At Elijah's request, she prepared bread for him with her last measure of flour and the last drops of oil. Through his prayer, the widow's scanty store supported Elijah and her family for about two years.

There is much to learn, with humility, when one is ministered to by those one considers to be ritually unclean or enemies.

This morning, once again, Elijah is on the run. He has climbed down Mount Carmel after a dramatic and violent victory over Jezebel's camp, but he is under the threat of being killed by the queen's men. He flees into the wilderness. Here we find him, at the end of his strength, utterly disconsolate, literally asking God to take away his life, so that he won't have to face the hardship of another day. Many of us could recall at least once in our lives when we have been in the wilderness of utter loss, failure, burnout, hopelessness. If there is a moment in Elijah's story that countless people could identify with, this is the one. This is more than a moment of despair and exhaustion. It is the realisation of utter vulnerability. It is existential anxiety.

God's answer to Elijah's prayer is much more than a word of encouragement, and certainly no assurance that life is going to be easy. God reaches out to him: Elijah is ministered to in the wilderness in a gentle and moving encounter. 'The angel of the LORD came to him, [with bread and water,] touched him, and said: "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."' God reaches out to Elijah and provides food for the journey that has to be undertaken, there is no opting out. There will be mountaintop experiences, memorable and elating, but in between much time will be spent in the wilderness.

Elijah himself will have to walk for forty days before reaching Mount Horeb, where he will experience again God's presence - not in the great wind, so strong that it splits mountains, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, yet in the sheer sound of silence. The gentleness of this theophany has been prepared by the gentleness of God's feeding him in the wilderness.

Get up and eat. "Taste and see that the LORD is gracious, […] trust in him." (Psalm 34.8)

God's care shows up in our hour of need, when self-confidence and courage have deserted us. Our calling is to accept the bountiful sustenance God is giving us. Whatever the deep hunger and thirst that long to be satisfied in our lives, God knows them, and he can provide a way for grace. Only he can enter our troubled situations and minister to us, in the midst of the trouble.

He has already provided bread for our journey, the bread of life, the bread of new life, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Get up and eat. Yes, the journey is hard – Christ knows it only too well. His desire is to be our journeying bread, our comfort, our nourishment, our strength. The community called church is, at its core, a community of people who hunger for Christ's life. And also a journeying community. Our journey is, in the words of the author of the letter to the Ephesians, to be imitators of God.

I was reminded of words that are attributed to Martin Luther: "This life is not godliness, but the process of becoming godly, not health, but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise" (*Defence and Explanation of All the Articles*).

Is this not extraordinarily presumptuous to try to imitate God? This is quite a journey to attempt to undertake! Yet take a moment to remember that Jesus himself was in the footsteps of God through this world. He prepared the path for us and offered the bread of life to sustain us and to transform us. Get up and eat. Accept what is offered to you. It is bread for the long haul.

In a few moments you will hear again that this bread of life that we receive - not only in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, but also in the daily relationship of love, of unity, of communion that God proposes - this bread of life is given not only for you, but also for many. It is bread of a new life that embraces all creation – we cannot claim it for ourselves. This bread is given to be shared, in each and every moment of our lives. As Elijah's prophetic calling and identity have been

re-made after he has eaten the bread that God had offered, likewise our calling and our identity will be re-shaped if we taste and see that the Lord is gracious.

Imitate God, share the bread of your life with all those who hunger - for physical food, for consolation, for justice, for freedom, for hospitality, for reconciliation, for truth. Provide bread that sustains their journey.

When Christ comes to dwell in us as the bread of eternal life, feed on him in your hearts with faith and thanksgiving.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 11th Sunday after Trinity

The Blessed Virgin Mary

15th August 2021

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

It often puzzles UK holidaymakers visiting France in the summer to find all the shops shut on 15th August. This is because it is not a date that resonates with people in the UK, even if they are churchgoers. Yet it is a date on which the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Anglican traditions of Christianity unite to celebrate the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In France it is a public holiday.

For Roman Catholics, this is the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin – a celebration of Mary being assumed body and soul into God's eternal presence as Queen of Heaven. For Orthodox Christians, it is the feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God – a celebration of Mary falling asleep in the eternal arms of God at the end of her life on earth. In the church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio in Sicily, there is a mosaic which shows on one side the Nativity – Mary with the infant Jesus in swaddling clothes, placing him in the manger - and on the other side the Dormition – Mary fallen asleep, with the risen Christ holding her 'soul' as a baby in swaddling clothes, carrying her up to heaven to begin her new life in God.

Since there is no direct scriptural account of the end of Mary's life, Anglicans have been hesitant about the detail of both these feasts, so we celebrate the more generic Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary. People sometimes think the Assumption and the Dormition mean that Mary didn't really die – she was simply assumed into heaven or fell asleep. In fact, neither feast denies the human death of Mary. But they do point to Mary's death as one of victory (the assumption of body and soul into heavenly glory) and of peace (the falling asleep). At the end of her earthly life, in which she had known terrible suffering and great joy, Mary shares in the victory of Christ over sin and death and reaches her eternal rest and reign in heaven.

There is so much one could say about Mary, and so little time in a short reflection like this. Her importance in the tradition of the churches cannot be overstated. It was the sense of wonder at her being so graced as to touch the life of God that led many to revere her.

Mary is central to the biblical story of salvation. Sometimes referred to as the new Eve (as Christ is referred to as the Second Adam), it is interesting to compare one telling reaction of Eve and Mary. The first time sin is mentioned in the Bible, when Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit, their immediate reaction is to try to hide. It's a classic human response when we know we have done something wrong. Sin and shame close us in on ourselves, prevent us from being open to others and to God. None of us is immune from this, however hard we try. And it brings with it a sense of fear – fear of ourselves, fear of others and how they might respond if they knew what we were really like, and fear of God. The human heart closing in on itself.

Yet God's response to this closing in was to find a way of entering into the heart of humanity, in the incarnation. And the incarnation was made possible by Mary. What sets her apart is that sin has not closed her in on herself. She is open and receptive to God. When the angel Gabriel tells her she will bear Emmanuel – God with us – Mary's response is 'let it be'. She does not try to hide.

I will come back to Mary's response and where it leads. But first let us look at her song, the Magnificat, which we say or sing every day at Evening Prayer and heard in our Gospel reading today. After the visit of the angel she goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is also expecting a child, John the Baptist. Elizabeth greets her with a blessing, and Mary responds with the Magnificat: 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.'

The song points us to God's saving love. As Mary is open to God and magnifies him – proclaims him - her own humanity is magnified, made fuller, more radiant. In our glorification of God, our openness to God's love, our humanity is healed and restored, made fully what God intends it to be. As the second century Bishop St. Irenaeus of Lyon put it: 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive, and the life of humanity is the vision of God.'

Yet the Magnificat is also deeply rooted in human existence. Its message includes politics, economics, ethics and society. The proud are brought low, the hungry fed and the rich sent away empty. There are echoes in this song, not only of our Old Testament reading from Isaiah today, but also of the song of Hannah following the birth of her son Samuel in which she praises God, reflects

on the reversals he brings about, and looks forward to his anointed one, the Messiah.

Mary's song, too, is a foretaste of the pain and struggle Jesus will face in ushering in the Kingdom of God. As Simeon foretells when she brings her son to the temple in Jerusalem for the first time, 'this child is destined for the falling and rising of many … and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

The thing about Mary's response is that it is only the first step: 'let it be with me according to your word.' The writer Bernard Levin published a moving article about the courage shown by a group of ordinary Dutch people during the Second World War. He noted how, having taken the initial decision to hide a Jewish family in their homes to protect them from arrest, they carried on taking one step at a time, gradually placing their own lives at greater and greater risk. He marvelled how they had the courage to say to themselves: 'We have said A; now we must say B.'

It was the same for Mary. Her acceptance of the angel's invitation was only the beginning. But her openness to God, and her courage, did not fail her. There would be other visits to the temple at Jerusalem. With the twelve year old Jesus, who stayed behind questioning the religious leaders, causing his mother and Joseph sorrow as they searched for him. With the adult Jesus, overthrowing the tables of the money changers, offering his radical teaching in the temple courts in the face of growing opposition from another generation of religious leaders, culminating in his arrest and crucifixion. Mary followed her son to the Cross and beyond. The Assumption, the Dormition, is her reward. Our offertory hymn today, 'Sing we of the blessèd Mother', puts it well.

Perhaps above all today we celebrate in Mary the openness, radical love and fearlessness seen in Christ himself. Like mother, like son. Remaining open to God's loving purposes 'whatever befall', she was, as the angel said, 'full of grace'. That grace, and her faith, carried her through. So it is not surprising that, in contemplating the end of her earthly life, the church should give her glory in these feasts. Today in our sister churches she will be celebrated as assumed into heaven, body and soul, or fallen asleep in the deep peace of God. All of us today can celebrate Mary, who opened God's way into the closed heart of humanity, now dwelling in eternal light and peace in the presence of God and the risen Christ.

We owe her something too. To be open ourselves, to God and to each other - not hiding, but learning to live without fear in the light and love of her Son. Each time we recite the Magnificat, may we learn to follow her example a little more, ready to receive and serve God. For St Irenaeus was right: 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive, and the life of humanity is the vision of God.'

Mary knew that, and she taught her son.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 12th Sunday after Trinity

22nd August 2021

Jane Quarmby, Reader

When I saw the reading set for today, I was in total sympathy with Paul when he wrote "Ask God to give me the right words so I can boldly explain God's mysterious plan." These two passages are really hard to explain simply and understandably. I'm used to Paul being somewhat undecipherable but John tops him today.

Let's start with Paul's passage about putting on the armour of God, based what he saw Roman soldiers wearing. Most of a Roman soldier's armour was worn for defence, not attack. He uses military images – alongside the strategies that will conquer very real spiritual enemies, evil and the devil. Most importantly he asks the Ephesians to pray all the time, pray in the spirit for everyone. Nowadays it's fashionable not to believe in evil or the devil, but Paul had no such illusions – we are constantly under attack and need to defend ourselves.

Looking at the Roman armour - The belt kept the armour in place and protected the kidneys and other vital organs. The belt of truth keeps us together and helps us defeat the lies of the devil such as that materialism, power, money and pleasure are the most important things in life.

The breastplate protected the heart and lungs - the breastplate of righteousness protects us against fatal mistakes and whatever evil can throw at our hearts.

Sturdy footwear protected the soldiers against rough terrain, sharp stones or spikes – the gospel of peace protects us from the sharp stones of life and the devil.

The shield was the most important piece of equipment, protecting against arrows, swords, spears and rocks, and it guards us against doubt, fears and evil.

The helmet protected the head, and protects our thoughts and minds from infiltration by the devil.

The sword was a sharp, offensive weapon, and our sword is the word of God. Our only weapon!

And prayer is the communication line between us and our Commander.

Now on to John.

A question I am often asked is "what do you do with your sheep?" and people can be shocked when I reply that we eat them, and they taste great! Many people nowadays aren't close to the production of food. Having seen us looking after our sheep, it's hard to contemplate us killing them, cutting them up and eating them – particularly when they find out that Garry does the cutting up and I do the mincing! Some of our friends are vegetarian and find it all highly repugnant.

So to read about Jesus talking about people eating his flesh and drinking his blood is likely to bring on a real sense of nausea if taken literally. His listeners would have been appalled – the Israelites were specifically banned from consuming blood, as it says in Leviticus - "If any native Israelite or foreigner living among you eats or drinks blood in any form, I (God) will turn against that person and cut him off from the community of your people, for the life of the body is in its blood." It goes on "You must never eat or drink blood, for the life of any creature is in its blood."

Those listening to Jesus talking about drinking his blood would have been shocked and most offended. Little wonder that many left him at that point.

What does he mean when he talks about eating his flesh and drinking his blood? Is it cannibalism? Is it supposed to be taken literally or not?

Let's start at the beginning. God has given a clear instruction that no-one must drink blood – hence kosher butchery, where the animal killed is emptied of all blood. So all this talk of blood is going against that clear instruction if Jesus really meant the red stuff coursing through his veins. God also states that the life force of an animal is in its blood. So then, logically, if one were to consume the blood of an animal, one would also be consuming its life force and would have that life force inside oneself. Hang on to that thought!

Jesus says that he is the Word made flesh. He talks about losing his own life, for the benefit of humanity. His flesh and his blood will be poured out to put the world back to how God intended it to be – the sacrificial lamb we talk about so often. Jesus also refers to himself as the Son of Man – he was just as at home on earth with us lot as he was in heaven with God. In this passage he refers to "the Son of Man ascending to where he was before. It's the spirit that gives life, the flesh is no help. The words that I have spoken to you – they are spirit, they are life."

He needs us to let the Word, the Holy Spirit, into our souls and bodies, to drink it in and with it the life force of Jesus. We need to eat his words, literally, to gnaw on them, to take their nourishment inside us. Without that, without truly believing in Jesus, in joining him as closely as we can, we are going nowhere. Christ said at the Last Supper, to take bread and drink wine in remembrance of him. We do that now as a sacrament when we feed on him in our hearts.

What exactly is a sacrament? To Eastern churches, a sacrament is a holy mystery. Many Christians consider it to be a way of seeing the reality of God, a channel of God's grace which can be seen and touched. It's important to us as a way of physically being closer to God through Christ.

So when we take the sacrament of communion, there's a huge amount of meaning behind it. It isn't just getting a sip of wine and a dry wafer. This is really difficult to explain to a nine-year old grandson who doesn't understand why he can't come up to the front with his Granddad and get what everyone else is getting.

But the point is this, that by physically taking the wine (in non- pandemic times) and the wafer, we are in our hearts chewing on Christ's words and allowing his life force to flow through us. We aren't physically eating his flesh and drinking his blood (although some think that we are doing just that), but to him that wasn't the idea – the idea is to join with him, so that we become one body with him and all the others who believe in God, and believe that Jesus was the Son of God, both human and divine. It isn't enough to just go up to the altar week after week if we don't have faith, if we aren't prepared to let Christ in and become his body, to do with as he pleases, not as we please. You can't fool God – you can eat a ton of wafers and drink a gallon of wine but if you don't have faith, all you'll get is indigestion and a sore head later. It's faith and the spirit which are central to this complicated business. And anyone going up to the altar for Communion needs to understand what it is they are doing and what it is going to cost them, as well as give them.

To let Christ's life force flow through you means becoming his body – his hands, his thoughts, his actions. Doing his work of looking after the poor, the sick, the homeless, the stranger, the hungry, the homeless, the frightened, the lonely. Telling people about him, not just in church but out in the wide world.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 13th Sunday after Trinity

29th August 2021

Christine Portman, Reader

Words from today's gospel: *Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'*

This summer I read a news story that made my heart sink. Volunteers for the Royal National Lifeboat Institute were sharing experiences of the "vile abuse" they'd encountered from members of the public. Coming ashore with those they'd rescued, including young children, people in desperate need of medical attention, they were met by attackers hurling beer cans and foul-mouthed abuse. This isn't the place to repeat it: these are things that defile.

But reading on, I cheered up. Facing political attacks from predictable quarters, within 24 hours the RNLI had received £200,000 in donations – a huge increase in giving and of people offering to volunteer. Decency still exists. Defending the men and women who go out to rescue people in distress on the sea, the head of the RNLI said: "They go home after a shout secure in the knowledge that without their help, the person they rescued may not have been able to be reunited with their own family. That is why they do what they do."

We've been truly blessed to live for many years in a society where, despite political differences, we've nevertheless largely shared a sense of what makes for acceptable behaviour. In most parts of Europe non-violence, social justice, human

rights - these have been understood as the bedrock of how a peaceful and civilised society should behave.

Lately I've been reading the French philosopher Frédéric Lenoir. In *Le Christ Philosophe* he questions whether or not such values would have become so deeply embedded in western society without the influence of Jesus – so radical in so many ways. He rejected exclusivity: women and children were welcome in the crowds and as his followers, he sat at table with publicans and sinners. Lepers, "unclean" women and madmen, the paralysed servant of an occupying Roman centurion - all were healed, none rejected. Jesus had compassion for *people*. Castes, tribes, different nations and religious groups, none of these distinctions interested him: he saw human need and knew the secrets of the human heart. The *Good* Samaritan was ... a despised Samaritan! Thank God: our lives have not been defined by violence, poverty and war – yet in our security, some of us may have forgotten, and more have never known such horrors. In a week when our screens have been filled with shocking scenes from Kabul, can we ignore the reality of what it must be like to live such precarious existences?

In today's reading from Deuteronomy God's people are told of the special place they hold in God's heart. Yet the text warns them: *"But take care and watch yourselves closely".* The psalmist makes it equally clear. Those *"who may rest upon your holy hill"* do so by virtue of their faithfulness to his laws. And in the gospel reading from Mark, Jesus gets to the heart of an issue we see so often in his preaching - the hypocrisy of the religious classes: *This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.* But God is not fooled by outward religious observances*: Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.*

Here Jesus pokes fun at the notion of "clean" and "unclean" foods. Elsewhere we see what he thinks of the religious authorities who attack him for healing a sick man on the Sabbath or who, in the name of the Law, cry out for a woman to be stoned to death. They *abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.* As followers of Christ, we too need to "*take care and watch ourselves closely".* When we call ourselves Christians we're called to look beyond the cultural

expectations of our society. Jesus asks us to show love and compassion to others, especially those who are in need. Whether a family is fleeing war or persecution or simply dire poverty, in this unjust and unequal world he shows us the way to respond: to show the same respect and decency he showed to those in need, to have a mind willing to understand how life may have brought others to desperate situations. Culture, status, religion, background, for Jesus these were irrelevant.

I don't know if you read about the attacks on the RNLI crews, but if you did, how did you react? Many of us feel unsettled by these 'strangers' who approach us for help. The situation is complex: multiple waves of immigration and problems of cultural integration have left many people feeling threatened, fearing that old ways of life are being lost. We can't minimize the potential dangers: at Kabul airport the security services have picked up people on 'no fly' lists – those deemed to pose a real threat to the UK. This natural wariness can sometimes grow into anger against 'outsiders'. The drawbridges start to go up. We see cuts in overseas aid budgets and going back on promises to help those left in vulnerable situations.

In these difficult times many people are under stress. Coronavirus, climate change, mass migration and the growing divide between rich and poor – all these are creating strains in society, polarizing opinions and causing growing intolerance. In times of trouble so often the weakest groups become the scapegoats for society's ills and European history shows us only too well the dark places that open up once a group becomes a political target. The Catholic philosopher René Girard pointed out that Jesus was the first scapegoat to understand the need for his death and to forgive those who inflicted it. His sacrifice upon the Cross shows the stupidity of scapegoating the innocent victim. None of us is perfect and if our own lives are relatively comfortable and we don't feel threatened personally, we mustn't forget that others may genuinely be struggling with issues that draw them to hate speech and extremism.

But perhaps you felt angry when you heard about the asylum seekers pelted with cans and abuse. Would anger be an appropriate response? Possibly. Jesus himself was furious as he turned out the dealers from the Temple. He was clear that people who claim to love God are always accountable for their behaviour. More often he calls on us to reflect. Think of him slowly tracing his finger in the sand as the crowd intent on stoning the adulteress melts away. *He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.* (John 8:7). *Watch yourselves,* he says, *If your brother*

sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. (Luke 17.3) or again, *If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.* (Matthew 18.15). Whether through anger or gentle persuasion, the message is still the same: when evil rears its ugly head, stand firm, don't let it pass. He doesn't pretend that will be easy.

Today's reading from the Letter of James sums up neatly what Christ means when he asks us to take up our cross: "*be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ... those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act - they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world*."

I'll leave the last word to the head of the RNLI. In response to those criticising their humanitarian work he said of the United Kingdom: "These islands have the reputation for doing the right thing and being decent societies, and we should be very proud of the work we're doing to bring these people home safe."

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 15th Sunday after Trinity

12th September 2021

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

I am still meeting people I haven't seen since our summer break, and we wish each other "une bonne rentrée". You may know that "la rentrée", the back-to-school time of the year is a very important affair in France - not only for teachers, professors, educators, kindergarten kids or students, but for many others. La rentrée is a turning point, we start a new journey, moving toward new horizons. Young people move on to the next grade; opposition and government have their "rentrée politique", with new matters to quarrel about; hundreds of writers are waiting for their new books to be dispatched to the bookstores for the "rentrée littéraire".

This is a season ripe with possibilities and expectations for new and important matters to be announced, new challenges to arise and opportunities for valuable learning to be offered. And it is, perhaps, the only time of the year when teachers take centre stage, bathing in a palpable light of hope and excitement about the guidance they will offer on the learning journey ahead.

Teachers were and are important in our lives, aren't they? They are so much more than mere dispensers of knowledge. They offer guidance, they can extend students' limits, stand by them to help overcome challenges, give them a gentle nudge in the right direction, and, when the moment is ripe, let students trace their own path. They can ask questions we sometimes live with for a long time. They can be a role model and inspire us to be life-long learners.

I am sure you have noticed that, rather often, Jesus was called "Teacher"- even in Mark's Gospel, which has in it very little teaching of the sort we find in Matthew

and Luke. There is point and force in Jesus' teaching, that is both public and personal. His most profound sayings burst forth out of his everyday ministry. Most of the teaching reported by Mark is spontaneous and happens "on the way", the journeying being a leitmotif of this Gospel, especially of its second part, that begins with the episode we read about this morning.

Almost exactly at the Gospel's midpoint, a major shift in Jesus' ministry takes place. The Twelve have been with Jesus for some time in Galilee and have seen him cure sick and lame people, cast out demons, feed crowds, even restore life to a young girl. They have undergone an intense apprenticeship with him. As Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem, the Twelve are ready to move on to the next discipleship grade. They expect new challenges to arise, but also new opportunities for valuable learning to be offered.

As Jesus changes to this new phase of his ministry, he must begin to teach the disciples what to expect, because, at the end of this journey, he will die. "Who do people say that I am?" he asks. The disciples give sensible answers: John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets. Jesus neither confirms nor denies any of their answers. Much of his ministry has clearly evoked these figures' legacy through his call to repentance, healings, and food provided in the wilderness. He simply listens to them, allowing them to offer everything they think they know, as if to say: "This is the place to begin. Now I have an important question: Who do you say that I am?".

Peter rushes to give an answer – he might have pondered it for some time: "You are the Messiah." We acknowledge this as technically accurate language - it is part of our profession of faith! Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah - the Christ. What Peter, and quite likely the other disciples too, have in mind, is a figure matching the first-century messianic hopes, a ruler who will purify the society, establish Israel's leading place among the nations, and usher in a new age of peace and holiness, all this accomplished by the possession and exercise of power. In brief, a glorious and victorious figure to whom defeat and suffering would be entirely foreign.

Jesus cannot accept a title bearing this implicit "job description". He will not deceive the Twelve. The time has come for them to be told about the cross of Christ, openly and boldly. This is a difficult lesson to listen to and cope with. Jesus upends everything they expect Messiah to be and to do. Jesus insists on identifying

with the lowliest of losers. He will allow himself to be judged and condemned as a blasphemer, to be mocked, tortured, and executed as a criminal. The Son of Man would suffer as Isaiah had foretold in the Old Testament reading this morning.

From a human point of view, suffering, rejection and death makes no sense. Saint Paul will later say of the cross that it was foolishness and a stumbling block for both Jews and Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1.18-25). But from a divine perspective, it makes sense, as suffering and death are accompanied by resurrection.

The class is not over yet! Knowledge about Jesus' identity is useless if it remains abstract. As he discloses more and more about his identity and fate, Jesus also describes who the disciples should be, if they confess him as Messiah. Those who want to become his followers should deny themselves, take up their cross and walk in his steps. It is not enough to confess Jesus as Messiah; the cost of discipleship, in Bonhoeffer's phrase, is high – are they willing to pay it?

When Mark wrote his Gospel in the first century, Christians were literally bearing crosses and losing their lives. The words of Jesus spoke directly to their situation. Christians reading this passage today in Afghanistan or northern Nigeria, for instance, have a depth of understanding which is hard to attain in the Western world.

Self-denial and cross-bearing language are counter-cultural in our society. Of course, we have watered it down. We call a life difficulty, like noisy neighbours, our cross to bear, and we think of cutting out chocolate during Lent as self-denial.

Rest assured: Jesus didn't encourage his followers to seek out suffering or martyrdom. He himself did not seek it, but he foresaw that it would be the inevitable outcome of his mission.

Self-denial is refusing to bend all one's energies to preserving, securing, and enriching one's life in the world. It is not self-annihilation, but redefining one's identity to be coherent with our God's logic of sharing in our weakness, vulnerability, suffering and shame.

To take up one's cross means being willing to accept the consequences of following Jesus faithfully, putting his priorities and purposes ahead of our own comfort; to accept embarrassment, shame, rejection, persecution because of our relationship with Christ; to embrace weakness instead of power; to live out the ethics of Christ

in the world, a world that is increasingly inhospitable to Christian values. To take up one's cross means to help carry the world's suffering, to take up our responsibilities as disciples, as seekers of justice and mercy, as peacemakers.

The question posed by Jesus – "Who do you say that I am?" – is one that must be asked of every generation. And of each of us. Don't rush with an answer. It's a question to ponder for a lifetime. The advice the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke gave to a young artist was: "Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. […] Live the questions now. Perhaps, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer." (*Letters To A Young Poet, Letter no.4*)

"Who do you say that I am?" is at the same time, "who will you say that you are?" We are not only called to confess Jesus as Christ, but also to be disciples, that means, "learners", perpetually listening, being taught by, and learning from, Christ.

The life of the disciple is a journey, the journey of learner on which, like Peter, we can express both our faith and, with honesty, our difficulty with Jesus' identity and mission, so that the Teacher can lead us on toward friendship with him in all eternity.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 16th Sunday after Trinity

19th September 2021

The Revd John Smith

It is interesting that this week's gospel is the next chapter after last week's gospel reading which, you may remember, began with Jesus asking his disciples who they thought he was. Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah or the Christ'. Jesus did not comment on this but asked the disciples not to tell anyone probably because Jesus knew that they were still so very far from understanding who he really was, what his true mission was and how that should be accomplished. He also had much more teaching to do. Jesus went on to say "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" The key words here are to 'deny ourselves' and as we explored in the Luberon last week, to deny ourselves means to cease making self the object of one's life and actions.

Today's gospel picks up from that message with the disciples demonstrating that they apparently had not understood that message as they were arguing amongst themselves who of their group was the greatest which, when you think about it, was a pretty dumb thing to do given that they had Jesus on the team. The ever-patient Jesus calls them to Him, sits them down, calls a child to Himself and uses the example of the child to illustrate what living His message truly meant.

But let us back up and give today's gospel some context. It occurs within the second major section of Mark (8:22-10:52), a section that contains a threefold pattern that appears three times namely, Jesus predicts his passion and resurrection, the disciples don't understand, and Jesus then gives the disciples further teachings. Most notably, this section starts and ends with accounts of blind people who are given sight. And perhaps this is a clue as to what this section is trying to explain. Last week Peter recognised that Jesus was more than a reformer, more than a miracle worker, more than a prophet and no ordinary rabbi. Yet still the disciples did not understand. Verse 32 of today's gospel tells us as much. But as the blind man is given sight, however gradually, so the disciples, who are blind to Jesus' mission and identity, are given sight, albeit gradually. Knowing and not knowing, understanding and not understanding are woven throughout these chapters.

It's not just that the disciples do not understand some piece of information. It's that they do not understand the fundamental truth at the very heart of the Incarnation. How is it possible for the Messiah, who was expected to free Israel from their Gentile oppressors, purify the people, and restore Israel's independence and glory, suffer and die? How can the Son of God die and, furthermore, why should it happen?

Sadly, as verse 32 also tells us, the disciples were afraid to ask Jesus to explain. We can speculate why this may have been. Perhaps they were too embarrassed to ask given that Jesus had explained several times already. They had been the closest of everybody to Jesus and the closer we are to Jesus, the more we are supposed to know (about God, about prayer, about the Bible, about religious stuff), right? Just

ask any priest! Or perhaps the disciples had a sixth sense as to what the answers would be and their distress at his teaching was so deep that they were not yet ready to accept or cope with that. We all want a Saviour who conquers enemies, not one who suffers and dies.

So, what happens when the disciples fail to ask the difficult questions? They turn to arguing with each other, squabbling among themselves over their rank and status. It is likely that they were truly embarrassed when Jesus asked them what they had been talking about for they kept quiet and did not tell him. If they were ashamed of their obsession with greatness maybe it was a healthy sense of shame and perhaps indicated that some of the message of Jesus was sinking into their hearts.

The response of Jesus was to call his disciples to him and sit down (the posture of a teaching rabbi). I can't help imagining that the disciples were a little nervous at this moment, perhaps anticipating a good telling off, for hadn't Jesus called Peter Satan earlier? Jesus could have started by saying "hey dummies, I am the greatest", but instead, Jesus says, "if anyone wants to be first, he must be last, and the servant of all". Of course, Jesus is the greatest in the kingdom. So, when He said last and servant, He was really describing Himself, accurately expressing His nature. He was truly first yet made Himself last of all and servant of all for our sake.

And to be last of all is the challenge that Jesus is giving us. The desire to be praised and to gain recognition should be foreign to a follower of Jesus. Jesus wants us to embrace last as a choice, allowing others to be preferred before us, and not only because we may be forced to be last.

To illustrate this, Jesus draws a child into the group and says "whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me". In any culture, children are vulnerable; they are dependent on others for their survival and well-being. In the ancient world, their vulnerability was magnified by the fact that they had no legal protection. They were regarded more as property than individuals. A child had no

status, no rights. A child certainly had nothing to offer anyone in terms of honour or status. But it is precisely these little ones with whom Jesus identifies.

Children are not threatening. When we have a tough, intimidating presence, we aren't like Jesus. Children are not good at deceiving. They don't do a very good job at fooling their parents. When we are good at hiding ourselves and deceiving others, we aren't like Jesus.

Jesus' rejoinder to the disciples' bickering over rank is another paradoxical assertion that turns social assumptions inside out. Just as we learnt last week that the saving of one's life requires us to lose it in a sacrifice for the gospel's sake, so too does primacy in discipleship demand taking a place last of all, as everyone's servant. This top-to-bottom reversal of rank realigns how we as Christians should receive those whom we have mistakenly regarded as beneath ourselves.

I have just given you the usual, standard interpretation of this text but there is something else in addition to the challenge that this text gives us and that is the good news and encouragement that Jesus welcomes us even when we do not understand or do not know. We mentioned earlier that knowing and not knowing, understanding and not understanding are woven throughout these chapters. This episode closes with Jesus taking the child in His arms and embracing the child, the ultimate symbol of not knowing, not understanding, immature and undeveloped. So, whilst responding to the challenge Jesus has given us and often failing, we need not fear our questions, our not knowing, our lack of understanding or misunderstandings, our confusion or our curiosity in the presence of Jesus whose perfect love casts out all fear.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 16th Sunday after Trinity

19th September 2021

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

Every teacher must have said this or heard it from a colleague: "Students don't listen, so I have to repeat myself. Always saying the same thing more than once…" Do you think, this is what Jesus is saying to himself at the beginning of today's Gospel episode?

I've heard it said that repetition is the first principle of all learning. Think of how we learn: a teacher restates or reviews a concept, which brings a deeper meaning in a new context. I believe that repetition has a key role to play in learning, and that Jesus of Nazareth had good teaching methods.

For the second time in Mark's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples what will happen to him in Jerusalem – betrayal, condemnation, suffering, rejection, a violent death – and then: resurrection. In the light of his first Passion prediction, one would think the disciples could hardly fail to understand. We are already familiar with their reaction, from last week's Gospel reading: they don't understand or, at least, they don't want to understand. And they are afraid to ask. The source of their fear could be manifold: they feel ill-equipped for the challenge, afraid of what it all means. The disciples remember how Peter was rebuked at Caesarea Philippi and want to avoid humiliation. In any case, their fear of asking questions means that they remain in a state of confusion. They miss an opportunity to draw closer to Jesus, because they are too afraid to ask hard questions.

Another reason for the disciples' silence is their preoccupation with their status in their group: who is the greatest among them? At least half a dozen among them could claim a higher rank. Who was the first to be called by Jesus? Andrew or Peter? Andrew took the initiative to follow Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry, and then he

introduced his brother Simon Peter. Who was chosen by Jesus to witness his glory at his Transfiguration? Peter, James, and John. Who introduced most people to Jesus? Philip seemed to have a natural ability to start conversations with people from outside the group of followers. Who was the treasurer of the disciples' community? Judas.

Who is the greatest then?

I think this is a question that preoccupies people nowadays as much as it did in Jesus' day. Some of us might remember Muhammad Ali's boast on becoming world heavy weight champion: "I am the greatest! I shook up the world! I am the prettiest thing that ever lived." (later, he had the honesty to comment: "I said I was the greatest, not the smartest."). More recently, we all heard the slogan in the 2016 American presidential election: "Make America great again!" On our side of the Atlantic, people are not any humbler. Greatness, we generally assume, implies power, accomplishment, fame, and all the other things that allow one to influence people and to make things go the way one wants.

In announcing his Passion, Jesus taught his disciples that following him involves self-denial, and yet they are set on self-aggrandizement. Jesus has a response: "Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all - and servant of all." True greatness, Jesus says, is not to be above others, but to take the lowest place. This is another counter-cultural lesson.

Jesus identifies greatness with service and empathy, with humility and the willingness to serve rather than be served. Surely it is this that's at the heart of Saint Paul's hymn in his Letter to the Philippians: "Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." (2.6-8)

All our arguments about greatness mean nothing if we don't stoop low enough to serve the one who is otherwise invisible in our midst. Greatness on Jesus' terms means being as humble, lowly, and vulnerable as a child.

Indeed, in the first century, children were of little importance. They were not the object of sentimental affection as they can be in our culture. They were dependent, vulnerable, powerless, with no legal status – therefore, voiceless and helpless.

Our thinking is different, isn't it? We value children. We deeply care for them. We incessantly ask of ourselves: Do they receive enough love and affection? A good education? Are they safe at home and at school? Are they being exposed to good role models? Will they have a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives? Will our children have faith? Will they live out that faith in service and showing compassion to others?

All these are concerns we express for children in our families and faith communities. We want to help them get ahead in the world, to become great. To become the greatest. Shouldn't we also order our lives for the good of children who are not our next of kin? Do we have the same concern for unknown children who are abandoned, molested, abused, trafficked, who do not have access to healthcare, education, or food?

The theologians and the Church, in general, say little about children, and I don't think that the significance of God choosing, in becoming human, to take on the fragility of infancy and vulnerability of childhood has been sufficiently explored. The Incarnation, God becoming human, reversed worldly assumption of greatness. Becoming human, God implied that greatness is not about separation, but about solidarity. Not about self-aggrandizement, but about empowerment of others. We are called to embody this kind of greatness, so that the world can witness the true meaning of greatness born out of love.

When Jesus welcomes the child to the centre of the community, he suggests that if we want to be great, then we must practice welcoming and serving those who are vulnerable, powerless, voiceless. God's wisdom is paradoxical: the last will be first, and those whom society might not value, are deeply valued by God. Unless we expand the community's centre so to include those people at the margins, we alienate ourselves from the very presence of Jesus Christ and of the One who sent him.

Greatness on Jesus' terms is risky. But, as Jesus teaches repeatedly, his way of greatness is also the path of life. And on this path, we should never fail to ask questions. There is much we could learn from children and I believe this is yet

another reason behind Jesus' bringing a child among the disciples. Children are not afraid to ask awkward, challenging and even impossible questions. They are not embarrassed by their ignorance. If they don't understand something, they ask and persist in asking. Children teach us to risk asking hard questions on our journey with God, to honour our imagination as a pathway to him, and, ultimately, to trust him as the source of all goodness.

Jesus said: "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, will never enter it." (Mark 10.15)

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Harvest Festival

3rd October 2021

Canon David Pickering

But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Harvest Festivals have been around for a very long time. Looking back through history, most cultures, including the Ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, all kept rituals involving the natural world. Many anthropologists believe such celebrations date back to the very early days of human development, when humans began to understand how to use the seasons to grow food.

But although many cultures and religions have had harvest celebrations, often going back over many centuries, the modern English celebrations we know were only formed in the middle of the nineteenth century. Lammas Day celebrations may go back to pre-Reformation days, but this was a commemoration at the beginning of the gathering of the harvest, at the beginning of August.

We may be unsure of the full meaning and aspects of early harvest celebrations, but it's likely three things were fairly common, even if they varied in their meaning and observance. First of all there would be a worshipful recognition and respect for various aspects of the natural world: a kind of adoration. Some form of thanksgiving would follow, and finally a request or prayer for future harvests.

I once had a parishioner who exemplified this approach. His wife and children were regular worshipers. But he couldn't stand all this *"Bible, Church and Jesus stuff."* His pride and joy was his allotment, where he said he found God. So he would come to the church at Harvest Festival, to thank God for his success in growing the family's fruit and vegetables, and to pray for his time on the soil during the coming

year. This same Adoration, Thanksgiving and Prayer are, or should be, at the centre of our Christian Harvest celebration today.

Over the past month, in our travels across France and Ireland, Christine and I have experienced much of the richness of God's wonderful variety in creation; from the hillsides of Provence and the open agricultural plains of Northern France to the rich greenness of the wet Emerald Isle and the brilliant blues of the wild Atlantic.

Adoration reveres the true essence of something for what it is, giving it its full meaning and value, as God has created it to be: something well reflected in this morning's reading from the Book of Joel: *Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things! Do not fear, you animals of the field,* (which might include we humans), *for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and the vine give their full yield.* This echoes the constant refrain in the Genesis creation story*; God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.* Adoration of the natural world acknowledges the perfection of God's Creation.

This may help us to understand the often misquoted line in today's reading from the first Letter of Timothy: *For the **love** of money is a root of all kinds of evil.* Money is not an evil in itself: it can be a just and convenient means of exchanging goods and services, and can express value and worth. Misuse happens when money is loved and adored for itself as a kind of idol. So as part of our Harvest Festival, rather than thinking of money as 'the root of all evil', we might instead give thanks for the gift of money, and pray that we be guided to put it to its proper use.

As we bring forward our harvest gifts, let's be thankful for the harvest the past year has brought us - and at the same time be conscious of how we can so easily be tempted to misuse God's generosity. Have we accumulated too much for ourselves? Have we worked for a just sharing of what the harvest has produced? Choosing how we distribute our harvest gifts, both as individuals and as a church is an opportunity to reflect on how we share what life has given us.

In our prayer and liturgical life, adoration should always lead to thanksgiving. Today's Gospel reading begins the words, *Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?* Here Jesus calls on us to live in trust, with a thankful heart for all that we've been given. If we

choose, we can worry and fret about daily life, but where will that lead us? Thanksgiving and hope can and should be more prominent in our lives than doubt and despair. Our opening hymn this morning, begins, *Come ye thankful people come, raise the song of harvest home.* The abundance and goodness of God's wonderful creation gives so much for which we should be giving thanks and a truly thankful heart seeks and works for a better world. True Harvest prayer goes beyond a wish for a better allotment production next year! We ask instead that the wonder and abundance of this year may be justly and generously shared by the whole of humanity. A just, fair and common sharing of God's creation is central to the Kingdom of God. This is what Jesus has in mind, when in our opening text he says,

But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

10th October 2021

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

Reflexion

"Wealth matters!"

This is a title in the 2021 edition of the Global Wealth Report I came across recently. You will be pleased to hear that global household wealth was largely immune to the challenges the world faced last year, and that wealth per adult rose by 6% to reach a record high of nearly 80,000 USD. Maybe this was not what you experienced last year, and you wonder if your microscopic contribution made it into this report or why haven't you seen people around you benefit from this considerable increase.

This kind of statistic focuses on the upper echelons. Nevertheless, the report has the honesty to mention that one of the greatest divides today, the one between the poor and the rich, has not ceased to widen. We may not be among the 56 million 'high net worth individuals' worldwide (that is, those who are millionaires or more…), but most of us are on the rather comfortable side of the gap, and we cannot even imagine its breadth. There is more than our personal wealth that contributes to this divide: our decisions, our consumption have effects upon everyone on this planet. Look up a website that provides an ecological footprint calculator, which approximates how many Earths it would take to sustain all the

world's inhabitants in the same lifestyle that you lead. If everyone lived like me, we would need 3 Earths – it is eye-opening and sobering.

"Nowadays, the rage for possession has got to such a pitch that there is nothing in the realm of nature out of which profit cannot be squeezed." Dixit Erasmus of Rotterdam, at the beginning of the 16th century. There is nothing new under the sun.

We have just heard one of the most radical exhortations of Jesus: "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor." These are certainly words "sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4.12) Do you feel "laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account" (Hebrews 4.13)? I do. It's so difficult to let possessions go.

Is this a story about condemnation of wealth?

There are two narratives running through the Old Testament. On the one hand, in the book of the prophet Isaiah, there is judgement against Israel's wealthy people, who pile up houses one after the other. Prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel also challenged the wealthy. On the other hand, Abraham, Jacob, or Job's wealth are tangible proof of God's blessing and faithfulness. Wealth, of itself, is not seen as evil.

No wonder the disciples are perplexed. If those who appear most blessed have more difficulty to enter God's Kingdom than a camel going through the eye of a needle, then who can be saved?

Throughout the ages, the Churches had a variety of views and teachings on wealth, ranging from "wealth is an offence or, at least, an obstacle to Christian faith" to

"wealth is the outcome of faith". The last century saw the development of a prosperity theology or "the health and wealth gospel", claiming that financial blessing is God's will for Christians. Whatever their theology, rather often the Churches embraced wealth and the power that came with it – or, at least, they befriended the wealthy and encouraged their benevolence, without questioning how their wealth had been acquired. Wealth matters.

Is this a story about enrolling for voluntary poverty?

Let's be honest: poverty is a perpetual state of anxiety and stress, it makes one sick in body and in spirit. Poverty is pernicious.

Nevertheless, Gospel stories, like the one we read, have inspired some to follow Jesus' exhortation.

In the thirteenth century, Francis of Assisi, *Il Poverello*, abandoned his own wealth and his inheritance, to live among the destitute. Yet we must understand that, for Francis, being poor was not a question of being without possessions merely for the sake of being without possessions. Rather, it was a sign of his poverty of spirit, that is, his total reliance on God in every aspect of life. For Francis this was not a deprivation, yet a wonderful liberation. He could now walk unhindered towards the utter poverty of Jesus on the cross.

In the third century, after listening to our Gospel reading in church, St Anthony the Egyptian went home with urgency to sell his property and donate the funds to the poor. He then moved into a cave in the desert to seek the Lord. After hearing the same verses today, very sadly, I don't think I'm going to feel the same urgency to change my life. Half-hearted commitment to Christ? Lukewarm Christianity? What is it that I am called to give away? On what possessions is God calling me to loosen my grip? How could I unburden myself to follow Christ?

“Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor; […] then come, follow me.” Follow me – yes, this story is an invitation to discipleship.

The man of means who approaches Jesus with urgency – he ran up! – is responding to prophet Amos’s injunction: “Seek the Lord and live!” He is a good and decent man, and of great faith. Yet he knows that despite his righteous life of honouring the tradition, keeping the rules, respecting the Law, practising the rituals, he is unfulfilled. Do we have a similar craving in our righteous life? Besides our reading the Scriptures, praying, coming to church? Are we hungry for more meaning? Do we have a desire to be with God in all eternity? Or do we just seek a word of affirmation that everything we are doing is right and that nothing taxing will be asked of us?

Jesus’ call is one to a life of discipleship, not to a life of poverty. Jesus invites the rich man to a life of meaning and purpose which so far has evaded him. This call “challenges and indeed cuts right across the instinctive attachment to that which we possess” (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*). Once again, all that it means to follow Jesus bruises our instincts towards self-preservation and security.

Jesus offers the rich man a call to discipleship, he invites him to give up all that makes up his identity and status in the world. The kingdom of God confronts us with a vision of life and identity quite incompatible with so many of our presuppositions about wealth, prerogatives, and selfhood – it leads inexorably to an identity crisis. Yet we are offered a new identity in Christ.

The rich man is not yet prepared to take the hard road of discipleship and to trust that God will accompany him on that road, guiding him through loss, shadow, suffering. Are we, individually or as a Church, fully prepared to walk that road? Or do we still look for worldly security?

Pope Francis, who has occasioned much criticism by choosing simplicity in liturgy, in his lifestyle and in his service, calls the Church to be "a poor church for the poor" and to leave behind wealth, the yearning for status and power, and all the strings that tie it to the world. And also to make the leap forward in love that Jesus asks of the rich man; without it, he says, our life and our Church become sick of "complacency and self-indulgence" (*Evangelii Gaudium*).

How could we make this leap forward without choosing a poverty in spirit, that is, our total reliance on God? Jesus Christ always points to the Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hidden, so that we accept and welcome our utter dependence on his mercy alone. He points to God as absolute claim and final succour. Christ gives us assurance that "for God all things are possible." This shifts the question away from how eternal life can be inherited to how we can live having encountered grace. If we recover a sense of grace, then the way to humble service, common good and love for one another will be open. In all our striving and hesitating and failing, Jesus will keep on looking at us through the eyes of divine love, never giving up on us, because, truly, for God all things are possible.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 20th Sunday after Trinity

St Luke the Evangelist

17th October 2021

Jane Quarmby, Reader

Today is officially Healthcare Sunday when we celebrate and remember all those who care for us when we are ill. It's always held on the Sunday nearest to the feast of St Luke, the physician who wrote over a quarter of the New Testament. Which happens to be tomorrow! So we are celebrating St Luke as well, rather than looking at the readings set for today.

Paul brought Luke to faith in Christ and we can see in Acts, that he sometimes accompanied Paul on his travels. He was well educated; his writing style is more accomplished than the other gospels. He was probably a Gentile, who never met Christ, and so his Gospel was based on careful historical research, interviewing people for eyewitness accounts, getting oral and written evidence. He wrote his Gospel and Acts as two volumes of the same book, and if you read them one after the other you can see themes like the salvation of the Gentiles coming through the Gospel and reaching completion in Acts. He stresses that the story of Jesus is historically factual, the gospel message is authentic, and is meticulous in dating Jesus' ministry with references to the rulers in power at the time.

The reassuring thing about Luke's gospel is that he emphasises that salvation is for everyone – outsiders too. God's salvation is there for everyone and anyone who has a repentant heart and a life of love for God and others, no matter what their background, status, gender or ethnicity.

God's love for the lost is shown clearly for example in the stories about tax collectors. Jesus's call to Levi, a tax collector, to be his disciple; the repentant tax

collector in the temple receiving forgiveness whilst the self-righteous Pharisee gains nothing (18 9-14), the chief tax-collector Zacchaeus, forgiven when he repents and turns to God (19 1- 10.) The repentant criminal on the cross was forgiven by Jesus (23 39 – 43). Have a look at Luke and see what other examples there are – it's a rich vein running throughout his writing. Samaritans were very much despised in Luke's time, but he faithfully records Jesus's pleasure at the gratitude of a Samaritan whom he healed of leprosy (17. 11- 13), and the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Women are mentioned in Luke's Gospel more often than in the other gospels – 13 of whom aren't even mentioned elsewhere. Luke has a real understanding of women – just look at the birth narrative, told from Mary and Elizabeth's point of view. What more natural from Mary than going to see her much older relative who was also pregnant in unusual circumstances? And I love the line later on after the shepherds had been to see the new born Jesus which says "All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often". That is a very feminine perspective!

Gentiles were the ultimate outsiders. Luke was probably one himself. Whilst Matthew's gospel account of Jesus's heritage goes back to Abraham, the father of the Israelites, Luke goes right back to Adam, the father of the whole human race.

He follows his gospel with his account of Acts, the spreading of the gospel from Jerusalem throughout the Mediterranean world. There's a lot of debate about when Acts was written but is seems to have been around AD 60 ish – there's no mention for example of the outcome of Paul's trial in around AD 62 as it ends before that with Paul under house arrest.

So we know why we celebrate St Luke, but why do we have a Sunday dedicated to Healthcare? Well, healthcare is important to all of us regardless of age. From the day we are born, most of us in the West will have benefited from a team of highly trained midwives and doctors making sure we arrived safely and our mothers had the best care too. This continues throughout our lives, and it's sobering to think that in the UK more people pass through the nation's hospitals than through its churches. On average the NHS in the UK deals with one million patients every 36 hours, and it employs more than 1.5 million people. Many of them are Christians, sharing the love and compassion of Jesus, bringing light and hope in the darkest of

times. At some time in our lives we all need care, whether we are ill or injured, in mind or body, or are too frail to look after ourselves.

I thought it interesting to get this insight from a Doctor on Healthcare Sunday –

What it means to be a Christian Doctor: “I chose to study Medicine, as I felt God was calling me to use the gifts and skills He had given me to help and serve other people. It is a hugely rewarding, stimulating career and it is a real privilege to care for others at the most difficult times of their lives. Nevertheless, there are many trials and challenges to face along the way. Being a doctor is more than a job. It is a vocation. By nature, most doctors are caring, compassionate and hard-working. Despite the best medical care, there will always be pain, suffering, anxiety, anger and tears. As Christian doctors, we are called to shine a light in this dark place. God calls us to love as He loves: the unkempt alcoholic, the self-harming teenager, the elderly patient with dementia, the outspoken member of the team. He teaches us to be humble (in God's eyes the cleaner is as important as the consultant) … it is hard to deny that issues of faith and spirituality become more important to patients when faced with illness and death. …God uses each of us in different ways to reach out to those around us…. We face tough situations and circumstances every day. But God is there with us, in every consultation, equipping us, guiding us, helping us with difficult procedures, giving us the words to say. When we are exhausted, He sustains us and gives us the energy to continue. Having had only four hours’ sleep before a night shift, I opened the Bible to Psalm 18:28 "You, Lord keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light”.

Humbling stuff. In our congregations we have people from the medical and caring professions. Today’s the day we should stand up and say a big Thank-you!

But we should pray for them every day too, play our part in supporting them and remembering that they too are human – they get tired, disheartened, and ill as well. As we celebrate all the advances in medical care, let’s not take the wonderful care we get from our medical and caring services here in France and elsewhere for granted – let’s give thanks to God for his steadfast love and presence in every care home, hospital, operating theatre, ambulance and clinic. But let’s also decide to do our bit to be there for family, friends and neighbours when they need care. A small gesture like a bunch of flowers from the garden to a neighbour of ours who is struggling with cancer treatment, made the day her hair fell out a little more

bearable. A phone call, a visit, a message, a hug – all have healing power. Christ healed through prayer – we can too.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Last Sunday after Trinity

24th October 2021

Bible Sunday

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

'You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life… Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.' (John 5.39-40)

A few weeks into my curacy I was sent along to a community meeting organised by the local council in the parish where I was working. The purpose of the meeting was to promote good relations between neighbours on a social housing estate. I was put at a table with a representative of the council and a group of residents. The residents were asked what they thought about living on the estate. The response was an angry outpouring of prejudice towards migrant families who had recently been housed there, complaining that they were unfriendly, had different customs and 'didn't even speak English'. Finally, one of the residents turned to me with a sickly smile and said: 'Doesn't it say in the good book, Vicar, "when in Rome, do as the Romans do"?'

I replied that, actually, the good book says that we are to love our neighbour as ourselves. I asked the lady if she had ever wondered what it might be like to find yourself in a strange city, far from family and friends, where you didn't speak the language. I wondered if her neighbours might actually be frightened of their surroundings, and of the people living there who were so hostile.

There was a silence, following which quite a sensible conversation developed about how cuts in local authority expenditure had led to the closure of services that had in the past enabled new neighbours to get to know one another - and how, by restoring those services, barriers with the new occupants might be broken down. But the comment about the Bible stuck in my memory as an unwelcome, if somewhat ridiculous, example of how if we are not careful scripture can be weaponised in the cause of intolerance and prejudice.

Today we celebrate and give thanks for the life and revelation of God in the scriptures, a library of 66 books written over a span of some fifteen hundred years, available to 98% of the world's population to read in a language that they know. We treasure the truth of God expressed there, the richness of form and language. We are called to engage with all our senses, to wrestle with the parts that challenge and confront us and to use all our intellect and imagination to understand it. There should always be a sense that understanding is a little beyond our reach, so that we work towards a deeper experience of God in its pages.

The living creative word of God, that is found as a deep stream running through the scriptures, is beautifully described by the prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament reading this morning. It quenches our thirst, satisfies our appetite, brings life and growth - calling us to thoughts and ways beyond ourselves. 'Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.' The creative word of God will shape us and challenge us as individuals and as a community. We need to be absorbed by it and so be led into new understanding. Each time we open our hearts and minds to the scriptures we are given the opportunity to connect to the living God, expressed most fully in God's living Word, Jesus Christ.

But what happens when we don't allow ourselves to see the scriptures as a living text, through which we can find God, but read it with the barrier of our prejudices and fears or use it for our own ends? Jesus's words in our Gospel today, addressed to some religious leaders who had used the scriptures as a weapon against him when they found him healing on the Sabbath, show how easy it is to manipulate the words of God, to stand outside judging rather than risk being open to the potential life within them. Jesus replies to his detractors: 'You search the scriptures because you think in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.'

As with the religious leaders who challenged Jesus, the authority of the Bible and specific texts have been used across the centuries to defend many kinds of intolerance and prejudice, including slavery, racism and the position of women. Scripture has been used as a means of creating barriers to define who is in and who is out; it has been treated as something life denying rather than a way to freedom and life and peace; the living word of God that includes rather than excludes, that brings life rather than denies it. As we enter into the life of God we are called to places and understanding beyond ourselves. God's thoughts and ways are greater than ours.

At present the Church of England is exploring how different ways of approaching and understanding scripture can lead to different conclusions about what it has to say about issues of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. The most intractable issue is how the church should respond to the huge social changes that have taken place over the last fifty years around attitudes to same-sex relationships and questions of gender. There's a growing acceptance that whatever teaching emerges from this process will somehow need to balance the needs of diversity and unity. Those involved will need to have those words of

Christ in their ears as they grapple with the reality that the church contains people with deeply held convictions that differ from their own, yet all are called to be one in Christ. It's hard work, but a necessary process if the church is to move forward in love and faith.

An encounter with Jesus, the living Word of God, changes us, as individuals and as communities – it moves us, shapes us and leads us on new paths to new understanding. In our Epistle today Paul urges Timothy, his younger colleague, to 'be persistent' in proclaiming the message of the Gospel, 'with the utmost patience'. As we are called today to reflect on scripture and use it to develop all our relationships - especially those with whom we disagree - and to deepen our own spiritual lives, let us try to find ways to enter into and be absorbed by God's word so that it ignites the life in us, drawing us together in love, so that God's purposes may be fulfilled in us.

As the prophet Isaiah wrote, 'So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.'

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Advent Sunday

28th November 2021

Canon David Pickering

Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise you heads, because your redemption is drawing near. (Luke 21.28)

Today is the 1st Sunday of Advent; the beginning of a new Church Year. We move on into Year B in our weekly lectionary, with the whole of St Luke's gospel to look forward to. We anticipate the celebration of God coming as one of us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Advent is the season of looking forward and moving forward. But I hope you will allow me to go into reverse and share a couple memories and reminiscences. As a small boy, probably between the ages of six and ten, Advent Sunday was a special day, when I handed in, with great pride and joy, my almost full Sunday School Stamp Book, crumpled and scruffy from my pockets over the past year. And what a pleasure to hold a pristine new copy for the coming year.

In more recent times, when The Alternative Service Book came out in 1980, each Sunday had an Introductory Sentence related to the readings and seasons. Sadly these Introits were dropped in Common Worship. The one for Advent Sunday really set the tone for the coming season: *Now is the time to wake out of sleep: for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.* (*Romans 13.11.*) Paul's words call on us to get up and get on with life in faith and confidence. Or to quote a common phrase in Church of England circles at the moment, go forward and live our lives in love and faith.

All our readings this morning are about looking and going forward.

In our Old Testament passage, the often doom-laden prophet Jeremiah looks forward with confidence to the coming of a descendant of king David, a leader who will put into effect God's righteousness rule. *"In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he will execute justice and righteousness in the land"* (*Jeremiah 33. 15*). This promise is repeated three times.

As we enter Advent and move on in our lives, we have to ask ourselves, if this is the Word of the Lord for us, do we have the same trust and confidence that God's righteousness, in other words his loving will, purpose and justice, will triumph in the end?

In our New Testament reading, St Paul takes this looking forward a step further. Are the Thessalonians ready for the coming of the Lord? Paul's letters to the Church in Thessalonica may well have been written when there was an early expectation of Jesus' return. So the Apostle calls on them to live in mutual love and holiness for the coming of the Lord. To quote the final verse from our reading, *"And may he (the Lord) so strength your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."* (*1 Thessalonians 3.13*).

Of course there was no immediate return in historical terms. But we can say that Jesus does return every time goodness overcomes evil, love replaces hatred, justice triumphs over any kind of corruption.

And this brings us to our Gospel reading where we meet the nub of the matter with what might seem at first sight a doom-laden prospect: *"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among the nations confused by the roaring of the sea and waves. People will faint with fear and faint with foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."* (*Luke 21. 25 & 26*).

Not a vision of the future any of us would look forward to!

So what are we to make of these readings? How might they help us in any way to prepare for the celebration of God born among us? In Jesus' warnings there are words that we might take literally. The recent Cop26 Conference revealed, *"on earth distress among the nations confused by the roaring of the sea and wave."* And we know why this is so as we see glaciers and icebergs melting, raising the

oceans to dangerous levels, people displaced from arid or flooded lands. But as with so much of scripture, the poetic truth is more revealing than the literal text. And the poetical truth can have a strong message for us.

We often say that things have to get worse before they get better. This is what some fear about the present coronavirus pandemic, especially with this weekend's news about the Omicron variant. This is what I think Jesus is saying to us this morning when we read the whole of the passage. He knew this would have to be his own experience. Things got much, much worse for him. But they did get much, much better.

As we affirm each time we say the Nicence Creed: *He was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day He rose again, in fulfillment of the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.*

Jesus does return and the Kingdom of God is being realised in many ways and places in our world today, even in our own lives. Wherever there is love, care, kindness and creative goodness, there is God's will and rule being fulfilled. We have to believe and trust that one day there will be a complete and perfect fulfilment of God's will and purpose for, and in, his creation. Jesus gives this assurance in the sentences that follow:

Then they will see the 'Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Again, there is no need to read this literally: we can feel the poetic power of his words.

Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. And here he speaks to people of all times who read his words: *Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."* (*Luke 21. 27,28 & 33.*)

Perhaps one of the things that crises like epidemics and climate change teach us and challenge us to face, is that to bring about the better world God promises us in Jesus, we, like him, will have to face a cross of change in the way we live our lives,

changes to our life style, changes to the distribution of the world's riches and wealth. This can be done by the grace of God, and it has to begin in our own lives.

Today's Advent message may sound very daunting, but it shows us that we can rejoice. It points to a great celebration: the birth of the one who by his life, death and resurrection revealed God's love for us. He can and will have the final victory.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Second Sunday of Advent

5th December 2021

The Reverend Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

On this second Sunday of Advent, our liturgy encourages us to focus on the prophets. The Lectionary offers us two, one from the Old Testament and one from the New – Baruch and John the Baptist.

The Book of Baruch is in the Apocrypha, the group of texts that didn't make it into the King James Bible but which are nonetheless used in our liturgy, including during Advent. The book is named after Baruch ben Neriah, scribe to the prophet Jeremiah. It's an extended reflection on that defining event in the history of ancient Israel, foundational to the writing of the Old Testament: the exile of the people to Babylon in the sixth century BCE.

The author of our reading from the Book of Baruch was writing in a context of communal despair. The kingdom of Judah, as its influence decreased, had become dependent on the empire of Babylon but sought help from Egypt. The attempt to play one power off against another failed, and the author found himself first being taken to Egypt and then among the exiles in Babylon. The people of Judah's identity and faith were both in crisis. It was into this sense of desolation that the prophet

spoke his words of encouragement: 'Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look towards the east'. You are going to be allowed home.

In Advent, we look back to the time of waiting described so poignantly in the Old Testament prophecies, with their metaphors of day dawning after a long night of waiting, of rivers flowing in the desert. John the Baptist is an ideal focus for looking at the prophetic tradition, as he takes up the mantle of Isaiah (to whom Luke expressly refers), as well as Amos, Hosea and Jeremiah. John baptises in the River Jordan, the boundary of the promised land which the Israelites had had to cross in order to enter into it. The Jordan also features prominently in the story of Elijah from the Second Book of Kings, in which the crossing of the river sanctifies Elisha as Elijah's successor.

John's message, as he 'proclaimed a baptism or repentance for the forgiveness of sins', was that everything the people had hoped for, the freedom and peace they had longed for, was about to arrive: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God'. That promise, he tells his hearers, with its words familiar from the ancient texts, is happening now.

It's a beautiful vision, and one which we should take to heart at the moment when it feels once again as though the northern hemisphere is standing on the brink of a wave of pandemic infection, as we prepare to enter a third year of uncertainty and separation. All that we see and hear on the news must be set against the narrative of a people looking for light in darkness – a vision of hope in the midst of turmoil.

We do well to hold onto that larger perspective, the perspective of which the prophets speak.

Our Gospel reading today, from St Luke's account, begins by listing who was in charge when 'the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness'. It, too, tells a story of communal despair, of a people living under the jackboot of an occupying army, the Roman Empire. One must never forget the political backdrop to the Gospels – Jesus's message was heard by a people living with their backs to the wall. When Herod the Great died, the Roman authorities took the decision to give each of his sons a region to rule, with Pilate retaining direct control of the most important region, Judea – a classic example of an imperial power seeking to divide and rule. So the wilderness in which John found himself was not only a harsh physical environment but also a metaphor for the desolation of Israel. Even though they had returned from captivity in Babylon, they were still not free. 'How long, O Lord, how long?' But by referring to the names of the emperor, the governor and the high priest, Luke emphasises that all temporal power is subject to the power of God, of which it takes a prophet – someone on the margins of society - to remind us.

There is also a sense of moral renewal in John's message, with its emphasis on cleansing, repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Wilderness experience does that to us too – none of us go looking for it, but so often it is in the wilderness that we experience transformation, renewal and reconciliation. There is an invitation in this story to reflect on those times and places in our lives which have felt like wilderness, and to see where and how God is present in them. For some, it's been part of the experience of this time of pandemic. It was in the wilderness that John

heard the word of God, and his response was a faithful one – a renewed attentiveness to the word of God in times of desolation, the sort of attentiveness that leads to transformation. John was rewarded with the hope that was coming into the world.

The Benedictus, which we read this morning, is the song John's father sings when he recovers his power of speech after his son is born. It is filled with the hope of dawning freedom, of light overcoming darkness, of a world where people will be able to live and serve God without fear any more, where there will be peace.

And so we find Luke's description of John the Baptist, pointing the way for the coming of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, picking up the image from the prophet Isaiah, which we also find in the passage from the Book of Baruch, of mountains being levelled, crooked ways being made straight and rough places made smooth. The Baptist's preaching announces the fulfilment of these promises, preparing his hearers for the arrival of the light, the light of Christ, of salvation for the whole world.

That is our hope, in these weeks of Advent. We are to wait for the light which shines in darkness and which the darkness has never, and will never, overcome. That is an antidote to the multiple crises affecting our world, just as it was for Judah and for Israel. A booster shot of hope, despite all that might otherwise seek to drag us down.

In his poem *O Emmanuel*, Malcolm Guite captures all that we wait for in this season of Advent, and that which is to come:

> O come, O come, and be our God-with-us
> O long-sought With-ness for a world without,

O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name
Come Root, and Key, and King, and holy Flame,
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,
Be folded with us into time and place,
Unfold for us the mystery of grace
And make a womb of all this wounded world.
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,
O tiny hope within our hopelessness
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,
To touch a dying world with new-made hands
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 3rd Sunday of Advent – 12th December 2021

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

How is your Advent going? Is it busy? Meaningful? Joyful?

By this point, many of us might feel weary. We don't have much time to wait for Christ, because we are trapped in pre-Christmas busyness: shopping, baking, writing cards, preparing for family gatherings, on top of other commitments. Advent is so short a time, and there are so many things we try to cram into it. Do you have time to feel joyful? Perhaps not. Why not pause today, even for the briefest moment, from the stories of doom and gloom, surrounding us, why not take off your tired, overworked, overwrought, anxious self, and try on some joy? It's Gaudete Sunday – rejoice!

But it's not easy, is it? Joy is not something one conjures.

How many times I wrote on a Christmas card: I wish you joy and peace, knowing well that joy is elusive, especially at this time of the year. Especially this year. Loneliness, family tensions, grief, deep anxieties – they are all contrasted and highlighted by the surrounding cheerfulness, and by the expectations and anticipation people are filled with at this time of the year.

You think, perhaps, that this is a paradoxical Sunday in the church year. We heard two exhortations this morning: one from the letter of Paul to the Philippians, that gave the name 'Gaudete' to this third Sunday in Advent – "Rejoice in the Lord always!" (in Latin, *Gaudete in Domino semper!*). Paul's enthusiastic encouragement resonates with the readings from the prophet Zephaniah and the canticle from Isaiah. A second exhortation comes from John the Baptist: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance!"

We also have two liturgical colours today: pink for joy and purple to indicate a penitential season. We might not find it easy to bring them together. Penitence doesn't sit very comfortably, not only with the busyness of preparing Christmas, but also with the western mindset. We're not medieval people, are we? Why

allow John the Baptist to take the floor on Gaudete Sunday? Prophets are killjoys, everybody know this.

Let Paul be centre stage for a while. Today's passage from his letter to the Philippians is one of the most luminous and warmest in his writings. "Again I say, rejoice!" I would like some clarification, though: what is it that we seek when speaking of "joy"? Absence of sorrow? An emotional high? Perpetual happiness? Deep-seated optimism?

I look around me and don't see much ground for optimism. Each day, the front page of the newspapers and the titles at the bottom of the television newscast remind me that events happen on a scale far beyond our reach and our ability to control them. Altogether, there seems to be no good news in the world. All is darkness and anxiety and fear. It is not easy to say, with Isaiah, "I will trust, and will not be afraid."

We are no different in spirit from the authors of today's scriptures. In their time, they too had to deal with the collapse of familiar social order or the consequences of dishonest and incompetent leadership, with personal or communal threats. Zephaniah, Isaiah, and Paul, they all wrote while being in situations of distress, and addressed people who, likewise, were in turmoil. Still, beyond the chaos and in spite of the hopelessness of their situations, the prophets and the apostle saw the promise of renewal, the promise of new and abundant life.

As for John the Baptist, if we listen carefully to him, we will hear a call to witness, in every moment and in every relationship, to the renewal God brings for his people.

Admittedly, the Baptist's words sound harsh. Nevertheless, we see crowds leave their homes and stream into the wilderness to listen to his severe and challenging speech, and to be baptized. They are filled with expectation, and Luke tells of John that he preached the Gospel to these people. Or, rather, to this people.

You heard, at the beginning of the scene, Luke referring to those who came out to hear John as being a 'crowd', an agglomeration of random individuals. By the end, he calls them a 'people'. In their willingness to engage with the Gospel proclaimed by John, they have been transformed from a gathering of persons into a community. Indeed, the Gospel is much more than "good news" for those

who receive it. The Gospel is a powerful, meaningful, and deeply transformative message.

To the bewildered crowd, who wanted to prepare themselves for an encounter with divine judgement and redemption, John says: “Bear fruit worthy of repentance!”. Repentance, or conversion (*metanoia* in Greek, literally meaning to change one’s mind or to turn), is the renewed relationship with God. It is the transformation of the inner self as the starting point of an external change, a reversal of the whole being. It is reconnecting with one’s true self, with God’s image that is at the very core of our being.

How could we enter the joy that is promised, unless we are changed, unless we allow our priorities to be changed, and our relationships to be renewed?

John does not call for a revolution, for a dramatic change. Yet for what seems to be, in a selfish and unjust world, minimal (or even microscopic) steps forward: Share what you have plenty of. Don’t take what is not yours. Be content with what you have been given. Don’t flee, don’t insist on looking for God far away from the grit of your days. Even if your lives are obscure, plain, difficult, inhabit them generously, honestly, faithfully. Generosity, integrity, and contentment are signs of a life that has undergone conversion.

John only asks for a minimal step forward because he trusts God to do the other steps, to renew and restore the people. No matter who came to him, John could see in their lives potential for conversion, for reconnecting with their true selves, and asked of them something significant. Maybe that is why he drew such crowds. Crowds that had the joy of becoming a people.

Beneath John’s difficult words, there is, indeed, an invitation to the joy of companionship with God. John’s message is one of both lament and hope, a reminder that things are broken, but that they will be made whole. He presents us with the joy of transformation: we can find the right path, change direction, and share in the joy of expectation, for the Lord is near.

Joy is not incidental. As Paul indicates, joy is prepared for through gentleness, constancy in thanksgiving, commitment in prayer, and letting God’s ultimate restoration of our lives shed its light upon our anxieties.

Joy also calls for mutuality. Today’s exhortations to rejoice are addressed not only to individuals, yet, above all, to communities. “Waiting together, nurturing what has already begun, expecting its fulfilment – that is the meaning of

community and the Christian life." (Henry Nouwen, theologian and spiritual writer)

If you need sustenance for your Advent journey and beyond, take away with you this most powerful image coming from Zephaniah: "The Lord your God, is in your midst; […] he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love, he will exult over you with loud singing, as on a day of festival." (3.17) We celebrate not only our joy, of a people redeemed and restored, but also God's joy, he who comes to invest the life of the world. God rejoices. God bursts into song over us. He turns to us and invites us to enter a life that is renewed in him, to joyfully draw water from the wells of salvation (Isaiah 12.3), and to let his peace, that passes all understanding, unite us with Jesus Christ our Lord (Philippians 4.7).

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 4th Sunday of Advent – 19th December 2021

Reader Jane Quarmby

Today's reading from Luke comes just after the visit by the angel Gabriel to Mary, telling her she will bear a child who will be the greatest person ever known on earth. She accepts the news, obedient to God's will, and just asks for a few details. We don't hear of any refusal or scepticism, nor argument from Mary. Then Luke goes on to say that a few days after this amazing occurrence, Mary travels to the hill country of Judea to visit an older relative, Elizabeth. She's welcomed with open arms, and Elizabeth is filled with Holy Spirit, blesses Mary, and the baby she is carrying leaps for joy in her womb.

It's a lovely passage, all happiness and excitement from the two women, one little more than a girl, the other much older and up to now, infertile.

But every coin has two sides, and so do most situations that people find themselves in. Much depends on how we react and how much we trust God to make things right. Elizabeth's husband Zechariah who was a priest, who could be expected to know his scripture inside out, didn't believe that his old wife could ever conceive, and as a result was struck dumb until the child had safely arrived.

Nowadays in the western world, the stigma of not being able to have a child has by and large gone. Women aren't looked down on by society if they are childless, it's seen a private sorrow or a life choice. Technology and science have moved on so that women who years ago wouldn't have been able to have a child, can now have treatment and have a child even in their 50s. But in the time of Elizabeth and Mary, Elizabeth would have spent her whole adult life as someone perceived as useless, of no worth, because she couldn't bear children. Of course no-one in those days thought it might be her husband Zechariah who might be infertile! It was seen as the only purpose of women and if you couldn't bear a child then you were very

much ignored, looked down upon, and rejected. No doubt Elizabeth had had her fair share of abuse and name calling in her village.

Equally the stigma of having a child outside of marriage has gone in our western society. Often, we see couples getting married after they've had their family, their children proudly trotting down the aisle as flower girls or pages boys. We have a lot of one parent families, and it is accepted that women can have children and bring them up alone. Not so in Mary's time – for her to become pregnant without the participation of her fiancé Joseph would have been a shameful thing to do. Her whole family would suffer the consequences – she would have been seen as bringing disgrace on them too, and on her husband to be. Some families would have thrown her out onto the street.

But we don't see any of this other side of the coin in the gospel. It's very much a cup half full, not a cup half empty.

However, it's interesting that we don't hear of Mary's family's reaction to her becoming pregnant. Why did she make that long and dangerous journey, 80 to 100 miles away, to see an older relative? Was it because the news hadn't gone down well at home, so she sought out someone who knew all about social stigma and was also going through a miraculous pregnancy? She was only a young girl. Had she not thought about the consequences in the excitement of being told by an angel that she was going to be the most honoured of all women, that she was going to be a mother, and the mother of the greatest King in the world? It's heady stuff for someone barely out of childhood. But if her family didn't believe a word of it, her life was going to be very difficult. Perhaps she needed to be with someone who would believe her, who would support her and help her.

And Elizabeth doesn't let her down. She welcomes Mary with open arms, without hesitation. Finally, she herself is no longer ostracised or shamed, and she shares that with Mary. She doesn't turn her away in case she brings shame on her again, she doesn't think about what the neighbours will say. No, she welcomes her in, blesses and celebrates her, and believes wholeheartedly that Mary really is blessed by God above all women and so is her unborn child. She says "Why am I so honoured, that the mother of my Lord should visit me?" She understands that this is a holy child and when her unborn baby leaps for joy it paves the way for the

extraordinary things that her own child will do and become. In Elizabeth's eyes, the pregnancy that could have shamed Mary instead brings her joy and honour.

We see here a glimpse of how Jesus will treat sinners and prostitutes – the same inclusive love that Elizabeth shows this girl. She sees God at work in those whom society excludes and mistreats.

It makes me think: how would I have reacted in such circumstances? How do I react now to those who are in difficulty? Do I judge rather than make welcome people in need? We still see in our society today people on the margins, ignored or thrown out. This Christmas there will be many young and old living rough on the streets in our cities, refuges will be full, refugees will still be desperately trying to get somewhere safe, people will be bullied because of their colour, gender, lifestyle, religion, or whatever makes them different.

I can't put it better than the American priest Judith Jones who wrote "Elizabeth's words and actions invite us to reflect on our own openness to the ways that God chooses to act in our world. What is God doing through unexpected people in our society today? Where is God at work through people whom our neighbours and fellow church members often exclude or treat as shameful? Will we listen to the Spirit's prompting when the bearers of God's new reality show up on our doorstep?

May we, like Elizabeth and Mary, trust that God is coming to save and free us. May we, like them, give thanks that God has taken away our shame and then respond to God's love by welcoming the shameful. May we, like them, become a community that supports each other as we hope and wait."

Amen.