

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Reflection – Second Sunday of Epiphany – 15th January 2023

Jane Quarmby, Reader

Our gospel reading this morning describes two events – firstly the testimony of John the Baptist that Jesus was the Chosen One of God, and secondly, the selection of the first disciples. So in a few succinct sentences we hear the main facts without any elaboration.

Unlike the other gospel writers, John the gospel writer doesn't actually describe the baptism of Christ. If you want to hear more about that you'll need to read chapter 4 of Matthew's gospel. But John seems to assume that we already know the details of the baptism and a lot of other information besides. Which is quite natural as the early Christians for whom he was writing would have a good background knowledge. For John it's more important to establish that Jesus really is the Messiah.

John the gospel writer describes John the Baptist as very clear that he himself isn't the Messiah, he's just a human signpost. That's a very humble statement if you think about it. He's not anything special, he's saying, he's just there to prepare the way and get things ready for the superstar to follow. He's happy to point Jesus out to others, even his own followers at the risk of losing them. It's an interesting experience being a human signpost – I used to be one when we opened our garden in England for the Yellow Book charity. On our open weekend, once the tea and cake team was installed in the kitchen, the plant sellers were set up in the yard, and the ticket sellers and dog were sorted out at the front gate, I would be in the garden directing people to the various areas they were looking for. I was no longer a person, merely a guide, literally pointing the way.

John admits that he didn't recognise Jesus as the Messiah, understandably perhaps as they were related and most people would never expect their younger cousin to be the Son of God. He either hadn't been told by his elderly parents Elizabeth and

Zechariah about the visit of Mary to Elizabeth when Elizabeth was six months into her long prayed for pregnancy, and her recognition of the holy child Mary was carrying, as described in Luke's Gospel, or he's not really understood it properly. But he knows once Jesus has come to him for baptism, and John himself sees the Holy Spirit descending like a dove from heaven and resting upon him.

Now he understands, now he knows that all his preaching about the Messiah, all the prompting by God to do what he has made his life's mission, isn't just crying into the wind. The Messiah he has been telling everyone about is real and right there in front of him. That must have been exhilarating for John – and perhaps reassuring that he hasn't dedicated his life to no purpose. John is rewarded for his faith by actually seeing the Holy Spirit coming down and resting on Jesus. Which is an interesting detail, for in the Old Testament, kings and prophets were anointed with the Holy Spirit but only temporarily. With the Holy Spirit resting on Jesus, it meant that his anointing was permanent. He was the long awaited Chosen One of God, or the Lamb of God, and in many pictures of the Baptist you'll see a sheep or lamb next to him. This isn't because he's a shepherd, it's him pointing ahead to how things are going to end, with Jesus sacrificed like a lamb on the same day that the Passover lambs were being killed in the temple. Jesus was to be the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the world.

But the eager people coming to John for Baptism wouldn't have understood that depth of his prophecy, they would think it meant that Jesus was the Messiah come to free Israel from the Romans.

Once our Gospel writer has established exactly who Jesus is, he then describes the coming together of Jesus and his disciples. The first two heard the Baptist point out Jesus as the Messiah and left him to follow Jesus. One is named as Andrew who, full of excitement, fetches his brother Simon Peter to see the Messiah. There's no hesitation in either man, they leave everything and go. It's a mark of how much they and others were desperate to meet the long awaited Messiah. When Andrew and Simon arrive, Jesus sizes up Simon and promptly renames him Cephas or Peter, meaning rock.

Rocks come in many sizes, shapes and colours, some wear better than others. And so it is to prove with Peter, this rough-hewn fisherman, the man who will go on to make so many mistakes in his eagerness, display endearing enthusiasm and a huge

heart, let down his Lord when it mattered, and be an enduring sign for generations to follow that Jesus loves us in our different guises, despite our mistakes and cowardice. Peter becomes the very rock on which the church of Christ was built, with an enormous vote of confidence from the Holy Spirit.

So much for Peter and his brother Andrew, we know quite a lot about them from the various gospels. But what about the other disciple who was with Andrew – who was he? No-one knows for certain because nothing much has been written about him. It's thought that it could well have been one of the sons of Zebedee, called John, who was very young at the time all this was happening. This teenager witnessed the short ministry of Christ first hand, heard him speaking, saw the miracles he performed and had such clear memories that his Gospel, the Gospel of John, has endured down the centuries.

So we know that many people were searching for the Messiah when he was finally announced by John the Baptist. A bit like the game of hide and seek that children play, those searching had found lots of dead ends, empty hiding places and disappointments. It's much easier to find a person who wants to be found. And finally, the day had arrived when the Chosen One of God was wanting to be found. Once he was ready to start his ministry, he came to find his early disciples, even give them new names and change the course of their lives for-ever.

Nothing has changed for Christ since then. He is still coming forward to meet and welcome new disciples. It's a two way process though, we have to take time to look for him even in the most unexpected places. We may think that he won't want us, that we're not good enough, or clever enough, or devout enough. But He knows that we, like stones, come in all sorts of different shapes and sizes. Some might be like Peter, big and strong enough to be shaped into the cornerstone of the church building, others might be small stones that bind together to support others, some might be easily carved into beautiful shapes, others might be in the middle of the wall unseen but still doing their job. All are vital in keeping the wall together and upright, supporting the roof, giving shelter and reflecting beauty. We all have our part to play in Christ's Kingdom – some may be Archbishops preaching to millions, but many of us might be cleaning the church floor, others running a soup kitchen, helping neighbours, keeping an eye on elderly relatives, giving harassed parents a break, working long hours to heal the sick, just being there for the bereaved, giving

generously of time and money to help others, making beautiful music, even just a smile and a hello to the lonely.

So let's not worry about what sort of stone we are, let's just look for Christ the Master Builder, and let him decide where we should be and what to do with us.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Reflection – 3rd Sunday of Epiphany – 22nd January 2023

Christine Portman, Reader

These January days still seem very short, but every day the sun rises a little earlier. Nights may be long and cold here, but I hope it's not a dark time for any of us: Epiphany is a season of revelation reminding us again how God shows his light and presence through Jesus to the world. You may have noticed how the readings are all pointing to God as the source of light and new beginnings: the baptism of Christ, the calling of the first disciples and, next week, the new wine of the wedding at Cana.

And that doesn't only apply to the gospel readings. Today the psalmist joyfully welcomes God as *my light and my salvation*. Then, in the reading from Isaiah we heard those well-loved words: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined*. The prayer after communion will talk of Jesus as the *light of the world*, of ourselves as *illuminated* by God's word and sacraments, praying that we might *shine* with the *radiance* of his glory. This echoes the message from Paul to the Corinthians: his exasperation with their petty quarrels is clear: his work is to *preach the gospel of Christ*, to shine His light into human lives, to break down barriers and *illumine* lives.

It's interesting that we have these readings in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. There are several references today to war and divisions but as Christians, we're called to be radiant. Shamefully, the one Church of Christ has been divided from the very beginning – just look at the warring factions in Corinth! Even today we see similar nasty undercurrents in the Russia-Ukraine war - a conflict in no small way egged on by inter-Orthodox rivalries. So we need to take Paul's words to the Corinthians very seriously when we work more closely with other traditions. It's so encouraging that throughout the chaplaincy this week we've been able to worship in Catholic churches and in Lutheran Temples with French Protestants, Lutherans,

Catholics, Orthodox and Mennonites. Christians must be prepared to move beyond their particular understandings and practices, come together simply as followers of Christ. As Paul reminded those Corinthians, we must respect one another's traditions, understand that there is but one Body of Christ. In fact, when we stop putting barriers between ourselves and *all* other people, when we no longer pre-judge others on the grounds of their race, religion, gender or any other differences from ourselves, we then move closer to the mind of Christ.

But even the disciples struggled to see that mind. Jesus didn't select his followers because they were well-educated or well-connected. Certainly not because they were intellectuals or theologians! They were simple people doing ordinary jobs – but what they offered him was trust and commitment. Notice the adverb Matthew repeats in today's gospel reading. Perhaps you spotted it? When Jesus says, "Follow me", ***Immediately*** they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ***Immediately*** they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Did this mean that they didn't stumble along the way? Think of all those occasions when they failed to understand his teaching or rebuked him for things that he did or said. They argued with one another, and in Peter's case, denied him three times before the cock crowed. The one who did lose trust and faith in Jesus was the one who finally betrayed him. The others, the faithful ones, made many mistakes, as we all do, but they recognised him as the Messiah. They trusted.

In today's gospel reading Matthew quotes famous and well-loved words from Isaiah chapter 9, and in doing so he made his purpose clear: *so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled*. Isaiah's words are heard again and again in Advent and Christmas services and usually the reader continues with verses 6 and 7: *For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.....* I can't even hear them without thinking of Handel's Messiah. Guided particularly by Matthew's words, Christians are used to hearing this passage as prophesying the future – but if that's all we see, we're in danger of missing something very important.

We should be wary of seeing these words simply as foretelling Christ's coming. It's worthwhile to look at some of the context in which Isaiah was writing. Why were

the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali held in such contempt? He lived in a time when the northern territories of Israel were under attack. The people lived in constant fear: aggressive neighbours had already captured Zebulun and Naphtali. People longed for peace and yearned for a strong and righteous ruler who would honour God and rule justly.

And what's the significance of the Day of Midian? When Isaiah celebrates God's breaking *the rod of their oppressor and the bar across their shoulders as on the day of Midian*, this recalls a story from chapters 6 and 7 of Judges. Gideon and his pitifully outnumbered band of warriors faced *the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the children of the east who lay along in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the sea side for multitude*. Armed only with clay pots, torches and trumpets, Gideon and his men surprised their enemy and their camps were completely routed. As Dennis Bratcher writes, Isaiah is reminding his readers: *God saved the day and made it quite plain that this was no ordinary military victory: this was the arm of the Lord at work, mighty to save*. Even though Israel's kings are weak, the country is under attack and food supplies are scarce, already God is with them. Hold fast, keep the faith!

If we only see Isaiah 9 as foretelling the future, we risk missing a key point. He's writing for people plagued by war, famine, insecurity and weak government. Well, look around us today – what's changed? So there's a message in here for us too. Look carefully at the tenses he uses. Not only *will* there be no *gloom or anguish* in the times to come, more importantly – all the victories that God has won for his people have already happened. He links the past to the present. Already, even now, the people walking in darkness *have seen* a great light; those living in a land of deep darkness - on them light *has shined*. You *have multiplied* the nation, you *have increased* its joy; .. the rod of their oppressor, you *have broken*. God is the only real power in the whole of creation, past, present and future. His victory over darkness is timeless.

Prophecy can be seen as simple fortune telling – or it can mean deep insight into and telling of God's truth. Isaiah's message is clear: God has always been with us and is with us now. As Jesus so often said, his *kingdom is at hand*. When we put our trust in him - and we can choose to do that *immediately*, we can step into our

futures without fear. As the psalm says: *The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?*

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon

Second Sunday before Lent - 12th February 2023

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

“Can any of us, by worrying, add a single hour to our span of life? I tell you, do not worry.”

This is a good point, Jesus, but is your counsel easy to follow?

We know that anxiety can have an impact - sometimes lasting - on our bodies, on our health. Yet, by simply acknowledging this, we cannot find a solution! Some worries are legitimate, and anxiety is not always rational. We not only live in anxious times, but our culture creates and propagates anxieties and fears.

Has the world ever been a worry-free place? When you think of 1968, for instance, what comes to your mind? This was a year of worldwide unrest: the civil rights movement in the USA, the protests of May 1968 in France, the Vietnam war, the Prague Spring ending with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia - to name only a few events. A year of various natural disasters including the Great Flood in France and England. A year of a flu pandemic with several million deaths. In 1968, the Earth was a worrisome place. Some would even say that things have since gone from bad to worse and that anxiety has become for many a perpetual state of mind.

The Gospel passage we've just heard comes towards the end of that long discourse of Jesus we call the “Sermon on the Mountain”. Some would say the Sermon sets the basic standard of Christian righteousness. It is a very high standard! The disciples are to be poor in spirit, meek, merciful, pure in heart, to hunger and thirst for justice, to be peacemakers, to give alms, to pray, to fast, to love one's enemies ... In short: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is

perfect.” Quite a challenge for someone who wants to be a faithful disciple. It could easily trigger the so-called ‘completion anxiety’, the worry that one will not or cannot perform well enough to meet the standards set by someone else, and by which one will be assessed.

“Do not worry about your life... do not worry about tomorrow...” One more command which anxiety-ridden disciples will struggle to achieve?

Many of us here, this morning, do not worry about tomorrow, about our food or our clothes. It was surely an unpleasant surprise, when, three years ago, during the lockdown, we were confronted with such fears, but all this is now behind us. Not often in our lives - if ever - have we experienced the devouring fears of those who live in areas hit by natural disasters or famine or war and cannot but worry about tomorrow. Not often - if ever - have we experienced the anxiety that discrimination and injustice and rejection can bring about. Nevertheless, we all have our smaller or bigger worries and they all come in the way of our living the life God has prepared for us. We would all like to have a life with no fears, or at least to know how to manage them.

Have you realized that Jesus encourages his disciples to read a book, namely the Book of Creation? “Look at the birds of the air ... Consider the lilies of the field...”

No doubt, spending time in green spaces or bringing nature into one’s everyday life can benefit one’s mental wellbeing and reduce stress levels. Watching birds and flowers has a calming effect and can take one, even for the briefest moment, out of their own anxiety-filled head. But Jesus is not offering an ecotherapy: he holds open the Book of Creation for his disciples to engage in a deeper reading and learning. What sort of book is this? How are we to read it? And what can we expect, as Christ’s disciples, to learn from it?

In the 21st century, we might find it difficult to agree with Maximus the Confessor, the 7th century monk, theologian, and scholar, for whom Creation and Scripture are equal in dignity and value, both equally essential for drawing us near to God. A reason for our disagreeing is that, over the last centuries, humankind had a growing preoccupation with reading nature in the language of mathematics that overshadowed other levels of interpretation. Maximus deeply believed that God has implanted in each created thing a ‘thought’ or ‘word’, God’s intention for it, the very essence of that thing, its meaning. “One shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt 4.4) and the Universe also is a word which comes from the mouth of God.

Jesus does not expect of his disciples a reading of creation that is scientific or intellectual, but one that is spiritual. Read creation with obedience - obedient receptivity to God's word, that involves a sense of wonder and an attitude of listening. Open all your senses to the wisdom expressed in things: mountains and beaches, weeds, worms and compost heaps, patterns in running water and in a spider's web - therein lies meaning which governs creation, and perhaps our lives as well.

If we recognise creation as charged with the words of God, this can radically change our attitude toward everything we touch. As Christians we speak often of ourselves as having been entrusted with stewardship over Creation - we should also develop the posture of a learner, of humble receptiveness to what creation can teach us. Our reading will keep sending us back with renewed awe to the book we hold in our hands.

This morning we heard - again - the very familiar creation story, the first pages in the Bible. So familiar that we don't really pay attention to it anymore. Do read it again! Even while looking at some colourful illustrations in a children's Bible, or at Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine chapel, or just going for a walk in the open. Hear the goodness and blessing which overflow from this world-affirming story. Against all negative and pessimistic philosophies and world-denying theologies and spiritualities, the book of Genesis affirms that the world is the good creation of our good God. The world's default setting is goodness. "God saw everything he has made, and indeed, it was very good.'

At the end of 1968 - a worries-filled year for many people around the world - Apollo 8 was the first human spaceflight to reach the Moon. While orbiting the Moon, on Christmas Eve, the crew made a television broadcast: 'We are now approaching lunar sunrise, and for all the people back on Earth, the crew of Apollo 8 has a message that we would like to send to you:

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.' They continued through the first 10 verses of Genesis. While observing the blue Earth rising in the Moon's sky, the three astronauts acknowledged with delight the goodness of the Creation and could have exclaimed, like Jacob, "Surely the Lord is in this place - and I did not know it." (Gen 28.16)

Christ's challenging and demanding Sermon on the Mountain is a revelation of hope and purpose and comfort. "Do not worry about your life!" Read in the Book

of Creation God's original blessing and the profound assurance of his care and goodness. In a world that does not seem to care, this comes as good news.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON
Reflection –Sunday next before Lent – 19th February 2023

Jane Quarmby, Reader

Today's readings focus on the transfiguration of Jesus, a strange event which is described both in the gospel reading and backed up by Peter in his letter. How do you describe something so unusual to someone who has never seen such a thing before? Matthew describes it in terms of blinding light – the face of Jesus shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light. Intense brightness, the terms used being the brightest most shining examples the Gospel writer could think of. All through the Bible God appears in the form of light. From Moses having to wear a veil when he comes down the mountain from speaking to God, because his face was so radiant, through to Jesus describing himself as the light of the world.

Transfiguration isn't a word we hear used very often. The dictionary definition is "a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state:" But how does it happen? The transformation of a caterpillar, through its chrysalis state and then into a beautiful butterfly, bearing no resemblance to its former self, was one example I came up with. Dragonflies too, emerge from a rapacious beetle-like carnivore which lives in the water to an ephemeral, flying insect. Life itself is transforming – if you've ever held an egg in your hand when it suddenly cracks and out of the oval, hard shell, emerges a soggy little dinosaur, cheeping away is amazing and hard to explain if you don't see it for yourself.

Christ's transformation on the mountain is however vastly different to nature's daily miracles. There's all sorts of things happening here. The event itself comes six days after Jesus explains to his disciples that he is going to be killed, and rise again on the third day. Not unnaturally, they were horrified and scared by this, not wanting to accept it. We have the famous scene where Peter protests and is sharply admonished by Jesus, going as far as to say "Get behind me, Satan!" Poor old Peter,

in trouble again, because he doesn't want to lose Jesus, doesn't want him to suffer, not grasping that it's all part of the wider plan.

Now however, Peter, along with James and John, is given a glimpse of how very extraordinary Jesus is. Jesus needs them to understand that he will rise again, that his will be a horrible death but it is necessary to achieve what he is tasked to do and he is in control. They need to understand that he is divine, and no amount of words will ever equal that blinding picture of Jesus, shining as brightly as the sun, in all his glory. Nor will they ever forget it or the words they hear directly from God, affirming Jesus as his Son.

If this weren't enough for these three disciples, they also see Moses and Elijah, talking to Jesus, despite them knowing that Moses died and Elijah was taken up to heaven. But here they are, large as life and talking to their leader. Moses represents the law, having taken down the Ten Commandments and written the laws in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. He led the Israelites to freedom. Elijah represents all the prophets who paved the way for the final and greatest of all prophets, Jesus himself.

This glimpse of the glory and divine nature of Jesus is in sharp contrast to what is shortly to unfold when Jesus is in Jerusalem, betrayed to the authorities, humiliated, beaten and killed, and true to his word and all the prophecies, rises again. Here, he's on a mountain, in glory, with shining white clothes, flanked by Moses and Elijah, with a bright cloud overhead, Peter is totally on side, knocked all of a heap by the wonder of what he is experiencing, and God himself declares that this is his wonderful son. Not so long after, Jesus is again on a hillside, his clothes have been taken from him and gambled for by soldiers, he's flanked by two criminals, the light is blotted out in darkness, Peter has denied he even knows him, and it's a pagan Roman soldier who exclaims that Jesus really was God's son.

What happened to the glory? Perhaps as Tom Wright says, "we only really understand... where we see it (the two events) side by side.... Learn to see the glory in the cross, learn to see the cross in the glory, and you will have begun to bring together the laughter and the tears of the God who hides in the cloud, the God who is known to be in the strange person of Jesus himself."

This is such a strange story, the transfiguration, that Peter felt it necessary to stress that it really did happen. He obviously feels strongly about it – were people denying

what he was teaching, making fun of him? He says “we were not making up clever stories when we told you about the powerful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We saw his majestic splendour with our own eyes..... We ourselves heard that voice from heaven.” It was a crucial piece of evidence for the early church that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. It remains crucial to us today. As the bedrock of our faith.

We may not be as lucky as those three disciples, in witnessing Christ’s transfiguration, but we can be alive to his continued acts of transfiguration in the world today. It’s hard to keep sight of these when we are faced with what seems to be an endless series of dreadful events – climate change, the earthquake in Syria and Turkey, the pandemic, the economic crisis, the devastation wrought by nature on New Zealand, drought and war in Europe. It’s easy to be dispirited. But all around us, God is using us to transfigure our world and each other’s lives. Sponsoring a child transforms their life. There are urban gardeners turning wasteland into food producing areas of beauty, dedicated teachers moving children out of poverty and poor prospects into lives full of meaning, soup kitchens and food banks keeping families fed, families and friends cleaning up litter, people recycling, taking time to contact lonely people, people rushing to rescue others caught up in disasters - we can all do so much to transform the lives of others and our surroundings. Along the way we may well find ourselves transfigured too – doing God’s work, really listening to and taking to heart all that Jesus said, has that effect on people.

This account of the transfiguration of Christ, the glimpse given to three ordinary men of the real nature of Christ, is what the Christian faith is all about. Martin Luther, in his last sermon, wrote that whenever he had doubts or worries, he always reread this passage and in particular the line “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him.”

Yes, there are lots of unanswered questions, from where did this take place to why was it only Peter, James and John who were invited to see it. But those questions aren’t really important today – like Martin Luther, we need to focus on the direct word of God confirming who Jesus was and telling us all to listen to him.

Who are we to ignore the word of God?

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON
Reflection –First Sunday of Lent – 26th February 2023

Canon David Pickering

The words of Jesus from today's Gospel:-

It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

And

'Away with you Satan, for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

And now, words from the Collect for Ash Wednesday:-

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.

All are key texts for the First Sunday of Lent: guides to begin this penitential season - and vital preparation before we can truly celebrate the Resurrection on Easter Day.

As we might well expect, our Gospel reading today, as in each of our three-year lectionary cycle, is the temptation of Jesus. Today we heard Matthew's account of the three temptations. Last year we had Luke's version: the same three, but with the second and third in reverse order. Next year we'll hear Mark's - a brief, one-verse summary. But the three temptations in Matthew and Luke, and especially the words of Jesus, should set us up with a pattern for our own penitential discipline during Lent, a pattern that will help us as we look to rise to a new life at Easter.

Down the centuries there have doubtless been many very saintly reflections focussing on the nature of Jesus's temptations. But this morning I'd like to share a few thoughts on the words of Jesus himself. This is as much a gentle reminder to myself, as to anyone else, of what Lent is fundamentally about: a reviewing and resetting of my relationship with God. In some ways this seems to be what's happening with Jesus in the Gospel reading today. As he entered a crucial stage of his ministry he may have been struggling to come to terms with his identity.

Tempted to turn stones to bread, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8 verse 3, "***One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God***". Yes, he tells the Tempter, to live, we may need food for the body, but above all else, God our Creator gives life itself. When we decide to give up anything for Lent we should be assessing what's important for our daily living in the light of our relationship with God. How much is He the foundation and priority of our lives? Is He the One from whom all else stems in all our daily interests and actions? *Every word* of God, wherever it comes from, scripture or elsewhere, is what makes our lives real and whole.

Placing God as the top priority in our lives is shown again in Jesus's response to the second temptation. "***Do not put the Lord your God to the test.***" We may not seek to jump off high and dangerous places, but we do sometimes live very near the edge in our relationship with God. The devil seems to be pushing things to the edge when he cites scriptural passages. Yes, God will always protect and care for us, but we cannot live by scripture alone, and especially not by individual verses taken out of context. The recent sexuality debate in the Church has shown that living by selective scripture alone we can be on a dangerous edge. We need to recognise that today we know far more about our human make-up, physical, psychological, emotional and behavioural, than the scriptural writers, perhaps even more than Jesus himself knew or understood. Our use of scripture is the foundation on which should be built the reasoned knowledge that has evolved down the centuries, and the understanding from this in an ever-developing tradition.

Lent is the time for us to reassess how we understand and see God as the priority in our lives. This year, for our Lent course we'll be using John Bell's book, *Ten things they never told me about Jesusa beginner's guide to a larger Christ*. Our focus will be on how God who was in Jesus the man can be more at the centre of our

lives, and for many of us, prayer and worship are the key places where we meet him.

The reaction of Jesus to the third temptation is, ***Away with you Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."*** If God is to be the priority and centre of our lives we need the sustenance of His grace that comes through worship. Lent gives us the opportunity to re-examine and refocus our devotional life. We can learn a great deal about our relationship with God by making time to reflect on our part in the worship of the Church and on our own personal prayer life. We might need to remind ourselves of how in Word and Sacrament we're celebrating all the saving acts of God, seen in the person, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. When we come together in Eucharistic worship, whether that's in person or by Zoom, God in Christ is made present among us.

In our personal prayer life too, Lent is a time to take a fresh look at how, when and where we pray, asking, *Where does prayer fit into my daily routine?* A good prayer to keep in mind for Lent is the collect for Ash Wednesday so I make no excuses for quoting it in full:

***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 lives and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.***

It could be a good start to take each line, slowly, one at a time, reflecting on the richness of its meaning. But for this morning, let's look at just a couple of lines. Yes, God is *almighty* in all and every way beyond our comprehension. His everlastingness, to quote Paul Tillich, ***has no beginning and no end.*** (*The Shaking of the Foundations*) And does God really *hate nothing* that he has made? Yes he

does not hate, and nor should we, especially in a world where there is so much hatred. If God has made us in his image, as Genesis proclaims, then we should hate nothing or anyone he has made. A tall order perhaps, to which we can only come anywhere near by the grace of God, and that will only come through prayer and worship.

Thomas Cranmer prescribed this prayer to be said every day during Lent following the Collect. Common Worship suggests it might replace the Post Communion Prayer, which Jamie has agreed to for today, and perhaps we may hear it on other Sundays during Lent as well. I hope we might all enrich our Lenten time by using it at least once a day during this penitential season. Have a good Lent!

Amen.



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

*19th March 2023
Mothering Sunday*

Christine Portman, Reader

Reflection Manosque, Lent 4 2023

We're now halfway through Lent, and I wonder what it's meant for you so far? Has it made any difference to your normal daily routine? In the past, after all the goodies had been finished up on Shrove Tuesday, serious fasting lasted until Easter – though Sundays were considered outside Lent, and, in some monasteries, the geese and ducks weren't thought of as meat because they swam like fish – didn't they? Thinking about Lenten fasting, reminded me of a monthly lunch with a reading club where the young woman next to me rather upset the hostess. She'd produced a delicious – but not extravagant meal. The young woman refused it and asked her host to make a salad instead. "I never touch cooked food during Lent", she said. Rather too loudly and addressed to the whole table.

Why do I mention that today? Well, there's a common thread running through our readings: deceptive appearances, blindness to the truth – but all the while, God's help in guiding us out of darkness and confusion into his light. Lent has been, and still is for some people, a time of fasting, but that's an outward sign of something going on inside. We know that the 40 days mirror Jesus' fasting in the wilderness.

But what exactly was he doing there? Why did he take such a long time in silence and solitude? Today's readings give us some clues. Unusually we've had a reading from the Old Testament, included today because it teaches good lessons for Lent. The first is this: when the way forward is unclear, even amongst all the worry and the pressure, we need to take time and find quiet space to listen for guidance.

Samuel was distracted by grief. Although he'd anointed Israel's first sovereign, King Saul had since turned away from God. The prophet was so caught up in the fog of his emotions that he could no longer hear God's word. Yet the moment he gave God a bit of space, what did he hear? *'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.'*

Focusing on his personal turmoil had left Samuel completely disoriented, but now he's shown a way forward. Allowing God the space to speak, he finds his purpose and sets out for Bethlehem to find Jesse and his sons.

And there he learns a second important lesson: relying on our first impressions can be quite wrong. The first son he sees is Eliab, and he thinks to himself, *'Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord.'* But then he takes a moment to listen for God's guidance and hears: *'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.'* Lent is a special time where we're invited to find more space to reflect on our relationship with God. In quiet and prayer we invite him in to have a deeper look into our hearts. And we do this in trust, believing that he will lovingly guide us in the right direction. So, already we have two sound messages: where there are issues that need dealing with, as long as we're open to God's guidance, he will show us what needs attention – and, secondly, if we keep listening, and ask for discernment, he'll show us the way.

Today's psalm is also about accepting God's guidance. We're very familiar with the idea of the Lord as our shepherd, the guide in whom we put our complete trust, and I suppose one of the reasons this is such a favourite is that it's a great comfort: *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; Surely goodness and loving mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.* But a part of that trust is in

recognizing that if we want to *dwell in the house of Lord*, we need make sure that's our home address – the place we live *en permanence*. Sometimes we go on holiday to strange places. We might forget where our home and our heart reside. It can result in disorientation and homesickness.

The house of the Lord is our *residence principale*. If we lose sight of that, life has a way of bringing us up short. If like lost sheep, we start to stray down dangerous paths, a *rod and staff* are there to show us the way. Not there to punish, but as the psalm reassures us, to **comfort**. The Good Shepherd loves us so much that for our own wellbeing he wants to keep us on the straight and narrow. This time of Lent is all about taking the time to hear God's voice, recognising where we may be going astray and asking honestly for help in discerning the way ahead. Where does God want to lead us, *for his name's sake*?

Reflecting honestly on our lives and where we now stand with God can be a painful process. Sometimes we'd rather not look at the less-appetizing parts of our lives! But God only wants what's best for us. As Saint Paul says, *now in the Lord you are light*. God doesn't want us to live in darkness. *Live as children of light - the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. Stay at home in God, by living in the light.*

In fact, we can't ever be anywhere except in God. God is, as in the recent film title, *Everything, Everywhere and All at Once*. He should get an Oscar! God never goes away. We humans do. And today's gospel shows how far even God's own people can stray. Jesus heals a man blind from birth – there's already a good deal of symbolism in that! But let's stay with the reported events. All the to-ings and fro-ings make it clear that this incident caused an enormous amount of fuss – the Pharisees interviewing the man himself: How did he do it? When did he do it? What do you think of him? Then off to interrogate the parents (scared to say anything in case they cross the authorities), then back again to the man himself. His response to their twisted questions says it all: *Here is an astonishing thing!* Because this healing poses a big question – who is really blind? The Pharisees had been blessed by faith in God, but they were so blinded by its rules that they couldn't recognise God at work. And it wasn't just the Pharisees who couldn't see the good of this healing on the Sabbath. Look at what Jesus' own disciples said, *'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'* What do those words say about



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

26th March 2023

Christine Portman, Reader

Reflection Lent 5 2023 (Zoom)

"The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones". Even today, some people take Ezekiel's words literally: they imagine that what he describes was an actual event. In the same way, there are folk who would have you believe, despite the opening words of the Book of Revelation, which the writer calls a *"revelation"* and a *"prophecy"*, that the visions John describes are a matter of hard fact. Nevertheless, many people these days are also highly-sceptical of what we read in the papers and especially online. It's hardly surprising, is it? Fake news has become part of our modern diet. Quite possibly it was always so. You've only to look at some of the scurrilous political pamphlets published long ago to realise that humans are very often "economical with the truth" as Sir Robert Armstrong once said.

But perhaps one thing has changed since the so-called Age of Enlightenment. Many modern minds are very literalist. We don't think in the way the writers of the Old and New Testaments thought. Nowadays things are very black and white: they either are, or aren't true, so people go to enormous lengths to doctor photos and produce convincing fake accounts. So let's think about some of the accounts we read in the Bible. The Creation story obviously can't be true: we're now certain that the universe, including our world and all its creatures wasn't created in seven days. Does that mean that there's no truth to be found in the first chapters of Genesis? What do we humans lose when we fail to see the truth at the heart of myths and legends, visionary and poetic interpretation?

What do you make of Ezekiel's message today - the Valley of the Dry Bones? Let's look again at his opening words: *The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley.* It's clearly a vision. Afterwards he hears God's voice, a clear explanation of what it all means: the bones represent the people of Israel. Exiled and directionless, they are as good as dead, but God's promise remains: *O my people, I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.*

The Valley of the Dry Bones is a resurrection story, a story about how, when a human being cries *out of the depths*, when we feel as though *our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost*; when "*we are cut off completely*", even then, in our darkest despair, God stands ready to act. So it's a wonderful reading to place in front of the account of the raising of Lazarus. Notice it's not referred to as the *resurrection* of Lazarus. That's made clear by Martha's words at the start when she distinguishes between wanting Jesus to bring her brother back to life now and his resurrected life after death: *I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.*

There's a good deal of controversy about John's account of the raising of Lazarus. Some people find it easier to accept the story of Jairus' daughter. I wonder if that's because little girl was at first just ill, then shortly before Jesus' arrival, she died. Perhaps we're happy to believe that Jesus healed her? Maybe the raising of Lazarus is so difficult for some because, according to Martha, *Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.'*

Whether John's words are accepted as literal truth or not, it's important to know that as early as the nineteenth century biblical commentators were asking questions like why, when Matthew, Mark and Luke all talk about Mary and Martha

in their gospels, why don't they mention what would have surely been the most startling piece of information about the family: that their brother was brought back from the dead by Jesus. Unlike the accounts of the raising of Jairus' daughter – which appear in all the synoptic gospels, the raising of Lazarus is only seen in John. Many scholars now believe that he wasn't at all interested in historical accuracy. His gospel is very carefully constructed and so different from the narrative sequence of events in the other three. It seems that he selected information from differing traditions, carefully combining existing stories to comment in a profound and theological way on the significance of the events.

Whereas Matthew and Mark show Jesus making only one visit to Jerusalem, in John, he goes there on four occasions. The raising of Lazarus is soon followed by Mary taking the jar of costly perfume and anointing Jesus, a sign of his burial that's soon to come. The triumphal entrance into the city is quickly followed by his arrest, show trial and execution. Before we read of such a shocking and rapid turn of events, John gives us those wonderful words that make sense of what's to come: *'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'* The words of Jesus at the raising of Lazarus are the last of his seven great I AM sayings in John's gospel – the pinnacle of his signs and teaching.

Before Jesus sets out for Bethany, he tells the disciples, *Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.* Do we look at John's gospel in the light of our faith? Perhaps the most important question we need to focus on is Jesus' own question after the I AM statement: ***Do you believe this?*** Martha wasn't being asked, do you believe that I'll raise Lazarus from the dead? Jesus was asking her if she believed in him as God's chosen one, the Messiah, the one who has the power, through faith, to give us life eternal.

Perhaps the question we should ask ourselves is more about *what* we believe and *why* we believe it. Jesus' parables are nothing more than stories, yet we love them for their rich layers of meaning and for the deep truths that slowly emerge with every re-reading. It makes little sense when we're faced with inconsistencies in the gospels, to then throw up our hands and say, as many non-Christians do, "Well,

that just proves it's all nonsense!" Jesus was a man, a man who died, but we believe he was also God incarnate. Life itself. Indestructible and eternal. He promised to send his Comforter, the Holy Spirit, to be with us after his Ascension. We know him in our hearts. That is where we experience the truth of the Resurrection – not in our ever-questioning minds.

In Ezekiel's vision, God puts flesh back on the dry bones, but as St Paul wrote to the Ephesians, *'you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.'* Our mortal existence is not the important thing. *'... if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.'*

Jesus' final words to Lazarus are *'Unbind him, and let him go.'* The Resurrection sets us free that we *may have life, and have it to the full.*

Amen

the disciples' view of God? A being who metes out cruel punishments to individuals, even innocents, as an answer to their sins?

No wonder God knew it was time to become present in the world as a man! Once we've met Him through the person of Jesus, how can we believe in a God who would cause a child to be born blind because his parents had sinned? Jesus came to correct so much of what had gone wrong in the relationship between God and his people. His life, teaching and self-sacrifice and his resurrection show us a God who frees us from our blind selves, a God who is Love.

Outward signs, or inner realities? Purple vestments, no hot meals and no flowers in church, or using 40 days as Jesus did to grow closer to God? As we look forward to the joy of Easter Day, we can reflect on what he taught us. We can wonder at his death and resurrection. God chose to be born among us, and Jesus Christ, as John Bell's hymn tells us, is still waiting in the streets, raging, healing, dancing and calling us. Have a good second half of Lent!