All Saints Marseille

Sermon

3rd November 2019

Year C: All Saints Sunday

Daniel 7.1-3, 15-18; Ephesians 1.11-23; Luke 6.20-31

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We have arrived at the season of All Saints, which includes All Saints' Day (1st November) and All Souls' Day (2nd November). It's a season that is very special, and here in this church dedicated to all the Saints we are privileged to celebrate it as our Patronal Festival.

The reason All Saints' tide is special is that our faith is not a solitary one.[1] Through baptism we become members of one another in Christ, members of a company of saints whose mutual belonging transcends death. All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day both celebrate this mutual belonging. All Saints' Day celebrates men and women in whose lives the Church as a whole has seen the grace of God powerfully at work. It is an opportunity to give thanks for that grace, and for the wonderful ways in which it shapes a human life; it is a time to be encouraged by the example of the saints and to recall that sanctity may grow both in the ordinary circumstances, as well as the extraordinary crises, of human living.

[1] Common Worship, *Times and Seasons*, Introduction to the Season, p. 537.

The Commemoration of the Faithful Departed on All Souls' Day celebrates the saints in a more local and intimate key. It allows us to remember with thanksgiving before God those whom we have known more directly: those who gave us life, or who nurtured us in faith. They are sometimes known as 'ordinary saints'.

What is a saint? Some of you probably know the story of the schoolchild who was asked that question, and who replied: 'A saint is someone the light shines through'. It turned out they were thinking of the saints they had seen pictured in stained glass windows. But it's a pretty good summary nonetheless. The light of God shining through a human being.

The English word 'saint' comes from the word 'sanctus', meaning hallowed, set apart for a sacred purpose. The early church tended to think of saints only as a group, and it was only later that 'saint' in the singular became used for individuals whose degree of devotion to Christ made the Church wish to remember them specifically.

Being added to the list, or 'canon', of saints by the church (which is why we talk of people being 'canonised') did not necessarily mean that all a saint's words and deeds were perfect. Saints were not faultless. But their lives were lived at a striking level of faithfulness and integrity, even if they made mistakes.

Saints recognised by the church are men and women who have given themselves to God in an unusual way, beyond what the rest of us manage. They are hugely varied, just as human beings are varied. And so individual saints appeal to different people. But what they have in common is that they have accepted and responded to God's grace wholeheartedly, each in their own way and to an exceptional degree.

I like the fact that this church is named after all the saints. It speaks of variety, of openness to possibility, of our individual ability to respond to stories of different saints in different ways. It also embraces the idea of the 'ordinary saints' I mentioned earlier, about which I will say more in a minute. It's a good time of year to be celebrating a patronal festival, with the emphasis on remembrance that November always brings.

Back in September, when the church was open for the weekend of the Journeés Européennes du Patrimoine, one of the questions we were often asked by visitors was whether Anglicans believe in saints. People seemed to understand there was a difference in this respect from the Roman Catholic faith. Well, being Anglican, as so often, the answer is 'both-and'. Saints who were already in the canon at the time of the English Reformation largely continued to be recognised as saints afterwards. What we don't now have in the Church of England is a formal process for recognising new saints. But individuals of exceptional holiness from all ages are acknowledged by the Church of England, even if they are not officially referred to as saints.

Some famous church buildings honour these people from recent times, particularly where they have died for their faith. If you have visited Canterbury Cathedral you will know that, at the east end of it, in a place of special honour, is a chapel dedicated to the Modern Martyrs. And on the west front of Westminster Abbey there are recent statues to 20th century martyrs such as Oscar Romero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Maximilian Kolbe and Martin Luther King. I don't think anyone would contest that they were saints. It's just that a universally accepted mechanism for adding them to formal a list no longer exists[2].

[2] Within the Anglican Communion this is devolved to local provinces (Resolution 79 of the Lambeth Conference 1958).

'Someone the light shines through.' There are also people we meet in our daily lives who are – and there really is no other word for it - saints. They make a difference, through their openness to God, their closeness to God. They have a beneficial effect on those around them – you always feel better for having been with them. They inspire other people with their qualities, which are often those named by Paul as the 'fruits of the spirit' – love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. They often also model the beatitudes which we heard in our Gospel reading from Luke this morning.

Luke's beatitudes – those sentences of Jesus that begin with the words 'Blessed are' – are different from the ones in Matthew's Gospel. And the differences are interesting. The sermon in Matthew is known as the Sermon on the Mount, because Jesus has gone up a mountainside to teach. In Luke Jesus has come down from a mountain where he has been praying, to a 'level place', coming among the people who are in need. Luke the physician, is preoccupied with the relief of suffering. Luke's beatitudes are not about wanting to be godly. His are about a community of followers standing with the dispossessed, the marginalised, the grieving. Practising the presence of Christ where the world is in pain. For Luke, faith begins with compassion and care, not a system of belief. He knows the truth which people have so often discovered, that if they go and do something for someone in greater need than they are, they find that they receive more than they give.

That's something which 'ordinary saints' are particularly good at. And today on our Patronal Festival is a very appropriate day to give thanks for them, for their impact on us, the ways they have changed our lives. As we look around the memorials in this church, the words written on them speak of how that works. I

have found myself wondering what they would have been like to meet. We don't know. But we are here, honouring the same God as they did. Holding the faith for our own generation, as we pray that those who come after us will do as well. For we are only ever stewards of the mystery of faith during our lifetime. Yet the church believes that our prayers are joined to those of the saints who have gone before us, in a continual song of prayer and praise to God. It is what in the Creed we call the Communion of Saints. In a world where everything seems focussed on the present and the immediate, we are privileged to hold a faith that connects us deeply to our inheritance from the past and to the promise of the future. For the Kingdom of God is both now and not yet. It breaks into the present from the future, like the promise of resurrection on the first Easter Day. And that is what we celebrate every time we meet in Christ's name.

So let us give thanks for all the saints, both those commemorated by the Church across time and space and those whose names are unknown to the world but whom we have encountered in our own lives. The priest-poet Malcolm Guite has written a poem about these 'Ordinary Saints', and I will end by reading it to you:

> The ordinary saints, the ones we know,
> Our too-familiar family and friends,
> When shall we see them? Who can truly show
> Whilst still rough-hewn, the God who shapes our ends?
> Who will unveil the presence, glimpse the gold
> That is and always was our common ground,
> Stretch out a finger, feel, along the fold
> To find the flaw, to touch and search that wound
> From which the light we never noticed fell

Into our lives? Remember how we turned
To look at them, and they looked back? That full-
-eyed love unselved us, and we turned around,
Unready for the wrench and reach of grace.
But one day we will see them face to face.

Amen.

All Saints Marseille

Sermon

10th November 2019

Year C: 3rd Sunday before Advent - Remembrance Sunday

Job 19.23-27a; 2 Thessalonians 2.1-5, 13-end; Luke 20.27-38

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

During the First World War there was an army chaplain called Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy, who had a remarkable gift for connecting with soldiers in the trenches. A feature of his pastoral approach was to have a constant supply of cigarettes to offer them, as a result of which he acquired the nickname Woodbine Willie. It was an intense and bruising physical and mental experience for the chaplain as well as those in his care, and he didn't survive very many years after the War ended. But his legacy is remembered.

There's a story about Studdert-Kennedy following a group of soldiers out into no-man's land in the middle of the night, when they had gone in search of a wounded comrade to bring him back behind the lines. The expedition involved courage, fear, and the high risk of an attack in which both the wounded man and those seeking to bring him to safety would lose their lives. One of the group suddenly realised they were being followed and shouted: 'Who's there?' Studdert-Kennedy replied: 'the Church'. 'What on earth's it doing here?' 'Its job!'

On Monday, for the first time I visited the Commonwealth War Graves cemetery at Mazargues. I wanted to familiarise myself with it before the annual act of remembrance taking place there later this month, in which like my predecessors I have been invited to take part. I had also had an invitation from Iain, the gardener who looks after the cemetery, to come and meet him if I was passing by.

Some of you will know the cemetery well, but for those who don't I would encourage you to visit it. Stepping into it from the gravelled avenues of the French cemetery next door, I was greeted by the unexpected sight of a lush green lawn. There's a silence about it, not least because footsteps are inaudible. There are trees, newly planted last year to mark the centenary of the Armistice. There are waterfalls and flowering shrubs. You could be in an English garden, the sort you would pay to go and visit.

I met Iain, who told me that there are one thousand seven hundred and fifty-four people commemorated there from two World Wars. When the Commonwealth War Graves Commission was set up, part of its mandate was to commemorate all war dead individually and equally. They are therefore commemorated 'uniformly and equally, irrespective of military or civil rank, race or creed'. There are a large number of nations represented at Mazargues from across the world – India, China, the Caribbean, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa as well as the countries that make up the United Kingdom. Most were in their twenties and thirties when they died, though some were older, and some were younger.

There is deep sadness behind the stories. Some lost their lives in acts of war, some in accidents, some in arguments. All the mess and chaos of human living. We heard in our Old Testament reading this morning how Job, faced with unimaginable suffering, begs for a record to be kept of it: 'O that my words were

written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock for ever!'

The stones in the cemetery have been carved and tended with devotion. The inscriptions are in the different languages and scripts appropriate to each individual commemorated. Some, as so often in war, contain the remains of those found with no identification, so that their name is not known: 'A soldier of the Second World War. Known Unto God.'

The cemetery at Mazargues contains, as all Commonwealth War Cemeteries do, the Cross of Sacrifice designed by Blomfield and the Stone of Remembrance designed by Lutyens. The inscription on the Stone of Remembrance, from the Book of Ecclesiasticus, is 'Their name liveth for evermore'. In this respect, you could say, the cry of Job has been heard – 'with an iron pen and with lead, engraved upon a rock'. While Iain and I were speaking, a lone magpie landed on the grass and stood still for several minutes. One for sorrow.

Yet through the love and devotion of those who have cared for it, in the peace and the dignity of the place, the determination to bring beauty where there was so much mess and pain, I came away with a sense that (in the words of the Book of Wisdom) their souls are in the hand of God, and there no torment shall touch them. As Jesus says in our Gospel reading today, they are 'children of the resurrection. … he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.'

If a family member comes to visit the cemetery in search of a distant relative or friend, it is the gardener who greets them and guides them, answering their questions, helping them find what they are looking for. Iain told me how he has explored the stories behind many of the individual graves, getting to know the

names of those who are buried there. There's something important about being known by name. In chapter 43 of the Book of Isaiah we read:

'… thus says the Lord,
he who created you…

'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
… [B]ecause you are precious in my sight,
and honoured, and I love you…'

For ours is a God who knows us by name. Christ was aware of the importance of the names of the people he spent time with. At the beginning of his ministry we hear: 'Simon … you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church', which works so much better in French: 'Tu es Pierre, et sur cette pierre je bâtirai mon église.' And at the end, after the resurrection, Mary Magdalene goes to the garden where Jesus is buried, where she meets him without realising who he is - as it says in the Fourth Gospel, 'thinking him to be the gardener'. Until he calls her by name - 'Mary' - at which point she recognises him, and becomes the first person to announce to the disciples the news of the resurrection, the defeat of death by love.

On one of the stones in the cemetery at Mazargues the following words are carved: 'Love's Last Gift. Remembrance.' If you think about it, the word 'remember' carries more than one meaning. As well as the important process of not forgetting, it also means to 're-member', the opposite of 'dismember'.

Michael Mayne, in his book *Pray, Love, Remember*, wrote this about that other meaning of 'remember':

> "To re-member someone is to do what all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't do to Humpty Dumpty: put him together again. It is to do what only God can do." To be re-created, put together again, but in God's likeness, as He had always intended us to be. "For to be re-membered is our destiny. In the end that is our end, our purpose: that is why we are here." Like the penitent thief who says: "Lord, remember me when you come into your Kingdom", our prayer is: "Lord, re-member me, refashion me, so that I may share the life of your Kingdom. Remake my life in the shape of your own."
>
> And his answer? "If you would truly remember me, if you would bring me out of the past into your present, then do this with bread and wine." And in our imagination we watch him as he takes bread in his hands and offers it, thanks God for it, breaks it, shares it. Says (by implication): "This is me. This is the pattern of my life. You are now to re-member me, that is to say, to be my body in the world, your lives offered to God, your lives lived thankfully, your lives broken and shared in the costly service of others." … We are presenting, in these four acts of taking, thanking, breaking and sharing, the proper pattern and shape for all human life. "

That is why we are here. It is, in the deepest sense, the church 'doing its job'.

I came away from the cemetery with a sense that holding the memory of those who lie there is part of our responsibility now. Iain has kindly lent us a wreath from the cemetery's store, as they are rarely used there now. We have placed it

before the altar here this morning. There is no one now based in Marseille from the English-speaking bodies who used to organise the annual act of remembrance at Mazargues. But on 28th November the church, in the shape of this chaplaincy, will be there, and if anyone asks you what on earth it is doing, you can tell them: 'Its job.'

Amen.

All Saints Marseille

Sermon

Sunday, 24th November 2019

Christ the King

Jeremiah 23.1-6; Colossians 1.11-20; Luke 23.33-43

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Today, the last Sunday before Advent, is the final Sunday of our liturgical year. And we conclude the Christian year with a celebration that focuses on Christ as glorified Lord and King. The celebration was introduced in 1925 by Pope Pius XI in order to emphasise the non-violent kingship and rule of Christ in the face of the growing brutality of the fascism of Mussolini. There's a warning to us there, in this new era where far right populism is becoming fashionable again, where slogans of hate trip too easily off politicians' tongues. The original festival was primarily intended to counter the claims of secularism by holding up the model of Christ, as King of the Creation, whose just and gentle rule is supreme. What might this notion have to teach us in these times, and what does it have to do with the crucifixion?

Jeremiah, in our Old Testament reading, describes a people whose leadership has left them fragmented and pulling in different directions (all too like our own times). They have lost any sense of who they are, or that they belong together in community as God's people. Jeremiah is forthright in condemning their leaders, who should have acted like shepherds to them but instead have allowed them to become scattered. But he points forward to a time when God will raise up faithful shepherds to lead them, who will restore their sense of mutual interdependence.

At that point they will be ready for the coming of the Messiah, as they will recognise his reign of justice for what it is – an echo of God's own nature.

Unlike Jeremiah's people, the Colossians, to whom Paul is writing, have already got there. They have recognised the rule of God, and have made the link between their own shepherd – Jesus - and God. They see how he has led them out of confusion and darkness into the light of a kingdom of justice and peace, and that the reason he can do this is because he is the full reflection of God's own loving sovereignty. He is 'the image of the invisible God'.

The thief hanging on the cross beside Jesus also has an instinctive sense of God's justice. He acknowledges his own guilt and Jesus's innocence, so that in the hour of his death Jesus promises that he will be with him in Paradise.

That's how our readings today fit together. But why the cross, in the middle of it all? The answer is that it is central to who God is. As one commentator has put it: 'The theological significance of Good Friday is immersed in the marrow of Christian faith and pumps through the bloodstream of the church's life. Good Friday forces the faithful to take a hard look at the violence and meanness of the world, the bloodiness of the cross, the depravity of the human condition, and God nailed to an olive shaft by human hands. Good Friday pulls the curtain back on the suffering God…'[1]

The 'suffering God'. One of the things scholars have spent a great deal of time thinking about through the centuries is known as 'the work of Christ' – what it is that Jesus achieved through his death. It is sometimes referred to as the 'atonement' – literally, 'at-one-ment', the bringing back of humanity to be at one with God. Different traditions of the church have tended to emphasise different

[1] Craig T. Kocher in *Feasting on Luke*, p 326.

ways of understanding the 'work of Christ'. Those who worship in the evangelical tradition often emphasise Christ as having died in substitution for sinful humanity - the one who was without sin voluntarily taking our sins upon himself and dying for them, thereby opening for us the gate of heaven. In another part of the church's tradition, up until the 1930s there was often an emphasis on Christ as victor in the age-old struggle between good and evil.

But in the aftermath of the Second World War, as the full horror of the holocaust became known, and with it the knowledge of the depths of depravity to which humans were capable of sinking, the somewhat simplistic model of Christ as victor no longer translated all that people felt about the reality of the human condition. The German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from the cell in which he had been imprisoned for his resistance to the Nazi regime, from where he was led to his execution only weeks before the war ended, wrote that 'only a suffering God can help'.

The concept of a God who comes alongside us in our suffering, who has known human despair from the inside and can therefore be trusted never to abandon us, was found to be of more help to post-War writers such as Jurgen Moltmann. The English theologian W H Vanstone wrote a hymn, 'Morning glory, sunlit sky', [a setting of which we will hear during the distribution of Communion this morning], in which he reflects on the cost of love for a suffering God:

> 'Open are the gifts of God,
> gifts of love to mind and sense;
> hidden is love's agony,
> love's endeavour, love's expense.

Love that gives, gives ever more,
gives with zeal, with eager hands,
spares not, keeps not, all outpours,
ventures all, its all expends.'

He continues:

'Drained is love in making full,
bound in setting others free,
poor in making many rich,
weak in giving power to be.'

This is the paradox, the mystery we celebrate today. What looks to the world like failure – a man put to death as a common criminal - turns out to be the most powerful inspiration for self-sacrificial love that the world has ever known.

Luke's Gospel grounds the story of God's love in the forgotten people of the world, ending with a condemned and dying thief being promised a place in paradise. In a Good Friday world we need a God who is not distant from our suffering, but who enters into the pain and hurt and horror with us. And yet notice how Jesus responds. On the cross he refuses to give in to the meanness and arrogance that surround him. In the face of evil and despair, the passion of his loving remains. To the cries for blood from the crowd, he does not respond. To the clubs and whips that beat him, he refuses to fight back. To the soldiers who have torn his body, he offers forgiveness. To the thief, he whispers the hope of eternity. On the cross the passion of Jesus's suffering is surpassed by the passion of his redeeming love. And that is why the church has accorded him the greatest honour that humans have to accord - that of sovereign.

And yet it is of course more than that of sovereign. From the earliest days of the church, in the processing which people did in their hearts and minds of the significance of this figure dying on the cross, there was a recognition that somehow it had revealed the true nature of the God who is the source of all things. As our epistle puts it: 'He is the image of the invisible God.' Or as Vanstone writes towards the end of his hymn:

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

And when we arrive at that recognition it changes everything. It changes our notion of what sovereignty means. It changes our notion of what deity means. It changes our notion of what our own lives are for - the costly service we see in Jesus changes our view of what it means to make a difference in the world. It liberates us from our focus on ourselves, encouraging us instead to focus on God and on other people as the proper object of our concern, living out the two great commandments of Jesus - to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves. The recognition of Jesus as the very image of God enlarges our horizons, expands our hearts, explodes our thinking away from self into a world of endless possibility. What if people began to live out the Beatitudes? What if they put into practice the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount? What if people who have been hurt by others could learn to forgive them? What if... ?

It is those things which this day, the feast of Christ the King, encourages us to reflect on. On this last Sunday of the church's year, Christ is presented to us as

the mocked King on the Cross as well of the King of the universe. The greatest humiliation and the greatest victory are both revealed. For there is irony in the inscription that was put above Jesus's head: 'This is the king of the Jews'. It was intended as mockery, put there by a weak ruler who had given in to mob mentality. There must have been passers-by who, seeing the inscription and jeering at the one dying beneath it, challenged him to reign from there. Yet the fact that for over two thousand years men and women have given up their lives to follow him, the fact that this church and countless others like it were built, and the mere fact that I am preaching this sermon this morning and you are listening to it, means that that is exactly what he does.

Vanstone concludes his hymn with these words:

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

Thanks be to God.

Diocese in Europe
Archdeaconry of France

The Oratoire, Aix-en-Provence

Sermon

Sunday, 1st December 2019

Advent Sunday

Year A: Isaiah 2.1-5; Romans 13.11-14; Matthew 24.36-44

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As we begin Advent, the Lectionary offers us some apparently contrasting readings. The beautiful vision in Isaiah is one we have heard in recent weeks, in the season we have been reflecting on the tragedy and cost of war. The vision is of all the nations streaming back to God, submitting to him as arbiter of their differences and asking to be taught his ways and walk in his paths: 'they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.'

Cut to Matthew and Paul, and the tone seems very different: 'all the tribes of the earth will mourn', our Gospel reading says, when the Son of Man comes. We are warned that it will be like the days of Noah, with some being taken and others left behind, and Paul urges us that it's time to wake up because it is all going to happen imminently. Our New Testament readings seem more likely to instil fear in us rather than reassurance. How are we to reconcile them with the vision of peace in Isaiah?

To put our Gospel reading in context, earlier in the chapter the disciples had been pointing with awe at the great temple in Jerusalem, but Jesus had replied that one

day it would be destroyed. By the time Matthew's Gospel was written, this had actually happened - the temple and city of Jerusalem were destroyed by the Roman army in AD70. The disciples assumed this would be the end of the world for Israel, and there's a cosmic dimension to it too – a sense of catastrophe that would usher in the new creation. Naturally the question on the disciples' lips – and no doubt too the lips of those for whom Matthew was writing - was: 'When will this be?' Jesus's reply is enigmatic: 'About that day and hour no one knows … only the Father.'

One way of reflecting on this passage – and more generally on the apocalyptic writing in Scripture often set for this season of the Church's year - is that it reminds us that human life may at times seem ordered and reliable (like the temple dominating the skyline) but at other times it can feel precarious and unpredictable. However much we may feel in control, we are always vulnerable. The unexpected and unplanned can throw our normal lives into turmoil – illness, bereavement, loss of employment or some other role that is important to us, an experience of failure, rejection or betrayal. It is then that our resilience is tried, our faith tested. We know intellectually that these things are part of life, but when they happen to us they can feel devastating. Like being swept away in a flood, as in the days of Noah.

There's an interesting commentary on this part of Matthew's Gospel[1] which relates it to the nature of fear and how we process it. Any course on stress management begins by pointing out that fear is not all bad. It's a mechanism that helps us to avoid danger. With a feeling of threat the amygdala in our brain increases its activity and begins the fight-or-flight response that kept our hunter-gatherer ancestors alive. Fear also protects us by engaging our more watchful

[1] Joretta L Marshall, writing in Feasting on Matthew, vol 2, p 242-6, citing the work of Louis Cozolino in *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 247.

responses. Our learned responses to danger accumulate, so that we instinctively take our hand away from the hot saucepan before we even feel how badly it is burning us.

Fear can, however, be so extreme that it paralyses us and makes us feel unable to take any action. The sort of fear that some people live with constantly can function negatively both in our personal and spiritual lives. The sense of always living on the edge of danger. Those who have suffered post-traumatic stress disorder know what it means to live with a sense of heightened threat that makes it difficult to live full and healthy lives.

At its best, between these two extremes – the fear that keeps us safe and the fear that traumatises us – there lies a developing wisdom that is important for survival. People can develop a courage and capacity to persevere in the midst of fear. The Gospel of hope can and should empower us to move boldly into the world, not to seek to escape from it. This is what, notes the commentator, the writer of Matthew's account would have been seeking to encourage.

Fear is, in the end, a God-given emotion that functions both positively and negatively in our lives. In the right moments it is an appropriate response, moving us to react in ways that protect us and our loved ones, and helping us see new possibilities in the midst of turbulent times. If we understand this capacity for fear to motivate positive action, we start to see texts like our passage this morning in a different way. The writer of Matthew's Gospel was not seeking to induce a fear-based belief, but encouraging people whose city and world had already been destroyed towards an attitude of trust, living out of their redemptive experience of Christ. They were encouraged to interpret their experience as part of the sufferings of the so-called 'end times' – the impending 'day of the Lord'. By placing their sufferings in the context of God's wider work, they would be

reassured of God's sovereignty, helped to listen for 'the trumpet' and live abundant lives. Apocalyptic writing is designed to engender hope in God's mighty and mysterious works of salvation.

The season of Advent is about hope. It's about looking beyond the present darkness towards God's light. The patriarchs, whose part in salvation history we acknowledge on this first Sunday of Advent, knew how to do this. Abraham obeys the call of God to leave the security of his home to found a new nation in a land he did not know, with only faith to guide him. He trusts in God even when God calls him to sacrifice his own son, an event in which Christians tend to see the foreshadowing of Christ's own redemptive sacrifice on the cross.

The symbolism of hope is everywhere in Advent, in readings and carols, prayers and music. 'The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.' – words from Isaiah (9.2). 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never overcome it', says St John.

That is what, as Christians, we stand for. It doesn't mean that we don't feel fear. But it does mean that when fear risks paralysing us with anxiety we can gather ourselves and hold to the hope we have in Christ that 'God's mighty and mysterious works of salvation' are as real for us now as they were for the patriarchs, for the first Christians, and for all who have lived in between them and us. The words that ring out through the whole of the New Testament are 'Fear not'. The message of the angel to Mary. The message of the angel to Joseph. The message of Christ to his followers. And the message we are called upon to own and pass on to others. There is a God who loves us, whose ways we may not always understand, but who was willing to become one of us, to share our joys and sorrows, to suffer and to die for us. And who rose again to show us that

nothing that can happen to us will ever defeat us, because even death itself is subject to his 'just and gentle rule'.

In a Reflection for Advent, the contemporary theologian Sam Wells has written this: 'Christ rose from the dead to show you how the story ends, that all your pain and agony and tears will be taken up into glory, that all your sadness will be made beautiful and all your waiting will be rewarded. [Christ ascended into heaven to show you that you'll spend eternity with God, that your hunger will be met in God's banquet, that everything you long for will be exceeded and overwhelmed in the glory of the presence of God, and that when you see the marks in Christ's hands and the Father's broken heart, you'll finally realise how achingly, convulsingly hungry God has always been for you].'

That is actually the hope of Advent, which culminates in the joy of Christmas. It's quite a message to take with us into the darkest days of the year. And quite a message for us to be able to pass on to others. Which, God willing, is what we will do.

Amen.

Diocese in Europe
Archdeaconry of France

The Oratoire, Aix-en-Provence

Sermon

24th December 2019

Set III: Isaiah 52.7-10; Hebrews 1.1-4; John 1.1-14

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

There is a story – a true one, as it happens - about a vicar who went into a bookshop in December and found that the theology section had disappeared. When he asked what had happened to it, the assistant replied that it had been 'moved for Christmas'.

Christmas does interrupt things, mostly in a good way. For many of us, it enables us to pause from the frenetic activity of our working lives and slow down, spending time with those we love, appreciating good things, reflecting on the past year and all that has changed, whether good or not so good. It's a time of year when we greet people we don't otherwise speak to, become more aware of our neighbours who are isolated, and (perhaps especially) of those who lack even the basic needs which most of us take for granted.

God interrupts us too, and in a good way. How often, if we look back, do we find moments when our lives took a shift in a better direction, or we became aware of a truth or insight that until then had been obscure to us. We sense a tugging at our sleeve, almost as though a voice was saying: 'No, look over here.' The poet and priest R S Thomas describes this sort of moment in his poem *The Bright Field*, when he writes:

‘Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle…’

It’s about being brought up short, by beauty or wonder. Our ability to wonder is God given and a blessing. Children are very good at it, in any season, but it’s always particularly special to see their excitement at Christmas, reminding us of how Christmas looks through the eyes of a child.

The Christmas story urges us to turn aside and look again at our understanding of the deepest truths of human existence. When I was young I recall hearing in carol services that St John was going to ‘unfold the great mystery of the Incarnation’. When he had finished doing it, although the beauty of the words never failed to move me, I wasn’t altogether sure if I was any closer to understanding the mystery. I suspect part of the difficulty was that, so far as I can recall, no one ever tried to explain what the expression ‘the Word’ meant. So here goes.

The author of the prologue to St John’s Gospel, writing from within the Jewish tradition, had the task of conveying to a largely Greek readership the significance of Jesus’s birth. Unlike the Jews, the Greeks had no expectation of a Messiah. So to write in terms of that promise being fulfilled – as the Gospels of Matthew and Luke do - would not have had much resonance for them. Instead, the author of the prologue articulated the significance of Jesus’s birth in terms of the Word.

The ‘Word’ was a concept common to both Jewish and Greek traditions. In the Old Testament, the word of God had called creation into being. Later the concept of the Word became associated with the Wisdom of God that brought the will of God to the hearts and minds of humanity. For the Greeks, the word, the *Logos*, was the principle of order under which the universe existed – the ‘reason’ of God, which also gave people knowledge of truth and the ability to judge between right

and wrong. Greeks were used to the idea that a greater reality lay behind this one – a world of ideal forms, glimpsed occasionally. The question was how to gain greater access to it.

Ingeniously, the writer of the prologue to St John's Gospel found a way of speaking about Christ's birth that was equally striking in the two cultures to which it was addressed, Jewish and Greek (and thus, by implication, for the whole world): 'the Word became flesh.' It was saying that the powerful, creative force which gives order to the universe and intelligence to human beings, was to be found in a person. It was saying that if we want to understand what this Word is like, we need look no further than Jesus of Nazareth. For in his birth, life, teaching, dying and rising, we will discover all we need to know about God.

That, broadly, was what the references to the Word were intended to convey. What do they mean for us today?

The miracle of Christmas is that it reminds us that we have to do with an incarnate God, who understands our human condition because he has shared it. The late Michael Mayne, once Dean of Westminster Abbey, used to speak in terms of God 'giving us his word'. Giving us his word both in the sense of giving us a truth he wants to share with us, and in the sense of our being able to trust him. In a piece he wrote about Christmas, Michael Mayne expressed in these terms what we may hear God saying in the incarnation of Christ, of God with us:

> 'Trust me. I give you my word that you are loved. Even when that doesn't seem to be possible: even when life is at its darkest. I am the God who is beside you and whose life is within you, beside you in your joys and in your afflictions, at all times and in all places, and beside you eventually in your dying and through and beyond your death. For I too, in my Word that

was once made flesh, know what it is to live, to suffer and to die. Trust me. I give you my word.'

That seems to me a concept worth moving the books in a bookshop for. And a beautiful assurance with which to begin a new year.

So this Christmas, let us welcome once more the Word made flesh, the child who offers us a uniquely intimate vision of the ultimate mystery we call God. Let us pause, turn aside to the miracle, and give thanks. Or, as those Greeks would put it, *efharisto*. Let us Eucharist.

Amen.

Diocese in Europe
Archdeaconry of France

All Saints' Marseille

Sermon

25th December 2019

Set I: Isaiah 9.2-7; Titus 2.11-14; Luke 2.1-20

The recent General Election in the United Kingdom was the first that had been held in December for nearly a century. It was strange to see some of the campaigning set against the backdrop of a country preparing for Christmas. Watching it all this time from a distance – in contrast to the heart of Westminster where I had spent the last three years – and having to explain it to French friends brought an interesting perspective.

It is always striking how politicians hoping to be elected promise certainty and clarity. Yet once the results are in, we have a sinking feeling that we will soon be back to the political realities of uncertainty and paradox. The paradox of being in one of the richest countries in the world where a child lies on a hospital floor because there isn't room for him in a bed. The paradox of hearing some of the most educated political leaders in the world saying that the process of cutting the United Kingdom off from its 27 closest neighbours will be simple and the consequences straightforward. Some in our congregations face dramatic life choices as a result of what was decided last Thursday. We know all too well here that the process will not be simple and the consequences far from straightforward. But it's what we have, and we must try to live with it creatively.

We have been reminded in recent weeks that the season of Advent is about paradox. We have been praying for the coming of Christ even though we know that Christ has already come. We have been rejoicing in all that is to be, while waiting for it to arrive with patient endurance. But it's only an example of what it means to live the Christian faith.

For a mature Christian faith is about learning to live with paradox, and to live into it fully. The mystery of a God who is wholly other being born to a teenage mother in an outhouse. Whose teaching of the unquenchable power of love overturned the anxious legalism of the religious authorities of his day, bringing life and hope to the many he encountered. Who as a result was perceived as such a threat to the establishment that his story culminates in a hideous death, and a rising in glory. The effect of which was to turn a group of frightened men hiding behind locked doors into the greatest missionary force the world has ever known. The mystery of a child who is both fully human and fully divine. The mystery of the creator of the universe coming among the creation in search of relationship - amazingly, with us.

Learning to live against the backdrop of this story - what the philosophers call a metanarrative, or grand narrative - allowing the story to permeate our consciousness and imagination, can help us see our own lives in better perspective. Whether or not we think of ourselves as Christian, we do it instinctively at Christmas, as we contemplate once more the familiar picture of manger, shepherds and magi - with a simple image of parental care at its centre and the miracle of new birth - and glimpse in it something eternal.

Contemplating the whole life of Christ can also help us live better with the uncertainties of our own lives. We long for our lives to be ordered, structured, the way ahead clear. Perhaps some of us who were drawn to become lawyers

were keen to find that sort of order in our working lives when we signed up. But instead, like everyone else, we find the mess and muddle of what it means to be human - the mystery of the one life that we have, with all its joys, sorrows and uncertainties. Yet the story of Christmas reminds us that it is also a holy mystery. That God is with us in the mess and muddle, having shared our human condition. That the child in the manger grew up to become an adult who entered the darkest place of human suffering and showed us that suffering and death do not have the last word. And who assured us that whatever happens to us he will never let us go. The story ends with the words: 'I am with you, till the end of time.'

It's part of what is often referred to as 'the great mystery of the Incarnation'. The light that shines in darkness, which the darkness has never overcome. It's also why the message of the angels, which we have heard again in this service, is 'Fear not'. It's a good message to take with us into the New Year, as we face whatever lies ahead.

Exactly eighty years ago this week, King George VI, on the threshold of a much more violent and deadly upheaval in our relationship with the continent of Europe than we are now facing, delivered a Christmas message in which he quoted a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins known as 'The Gate of the Year':

> And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:
> "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."
> And he replied:
> "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.
> That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

You couldn't put it better than that. Fear not.

May I wish all of you, and those whom you love, a blessed and peaceful Christmas, and a hopeful New Year.

Amen.