



## **All Saints' Marseille**

### **Sermon**

**Sunday, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2020**

### **Presentation of Christ in the Temple**

**(Candlemas)**

**Year A: Malachi 3.1-5; Hebrews 2.14-18; Luke 2.22-40**

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

I wonder if you have ever experienced a moment when something so beautiful happened that if you had only lived for that moment, it would somehow have been enough, for it showed you all the beauty, all the depth and all the significance that life holds.

Today is Candlemas, the day on which the Church recalls the presentation of Christ in the Temple. For Simeon, seeing the infant Jesus brought by his parents to be presented to God was such a moment. He took the baby in his arms and recognised him for who he was: 'a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of God's people, Israel'. And that was enough for him – there was nothing more that he wanted now. A moment which revealed the significance of everything, and not just for Simeon but also for the entire world. His words are an echo from the prophet Isaiah (49.6), where it says of the figure known as the 'suffering servant' with whom Jesus is often identified: 'I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.' All peoples will be brought home to God, their creator.



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

One thing that may seem puzzling to us is how Simeon and Anna both knew who he was. So many young children must have been brought to the temple in those days, and they had been waiting a long time. Yet when they saw Mary and Joseph with the child Jesus, they knew. They knew it through their expectant waiting, the lives of prayer they had led. Luke emphasises how attuned Simeon was to the movement of the Holy Spirit: ‘the Holy Spirit rested on him’; ‘It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah’. And ‘guided by the Spirit’, he comes into the temple just at the right moment. As Jesus would later say in the Beatitudes, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.’

There are different layers to this story, which is rich in meaning. By focusing on the temple and its traditions, Luke – writing for a largely Gentile audience – was keen to emphasise the continuity of the Christian story with Judaism. Remembering this is as important to us now as it was at the time Luke was writing his account. The failure of the Church at times to recognise its deep roots in Judaism has, tragically, resulted in a collusion with the many persecutions



suffered by the Jewish people through the centuries. We do well to recall this in the week we have been keeping Holocaust Memorial Day.

Another layer of this story concerns the role of ritual in human wellbeing. As humans we create rituals around the seasons of the year, and around the seasons of life: birth, coming of age, marrying, dying. They are ways of expressing our gratitude for the mystery of life and our reverence for the creator on whom we depend. In the scene in the temple, in accordance with their tradition, Mary and Joseph bring their firstborn to be dedicated to God, his mother welcomed back into the community after the birth, in reverence and thanksgiving for the miracle of new life. The circumcision of Jesus is in response to the covenant of Abraham, an acknowledgement that he is descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the people formed by God, from Moses, who led them out of bondage, and from David, the people awaiting a new Messiah.

Our Eucharist is one of the rituals of the church, in which we come to the Lord's table, bringing offerings in the bread and the cup, symbols of life, of what sustains us. We dedicate these gifts of God to the God who has formed us, who has led us out of bondage, we remember the Messiah who sacrificed himself for us, but who has been raised and who comes to meet us here. And so we put aside our cares, our preoccupations, as we remember that we are part of a bigger story, and that there is a God on whom we depend, who gives us life and gives it abundantly.

In declaring that the child Jesus was the light of the nations, Simeon's words gave rise to the other name for this feast: Candlemas, the day on which traditionally all the church's candles for the year were blessed. People also used to bring candles from their homes to be blessed – we must remember that it was once the



only source of light – and in the evening they would place them in their windows. As was often the case, the Christian festival drew partly on pre-Christian practice, when Candlemas was the festival of light, marking the mid-point of winter. In terms of the church's year, we are forty days from Christmas and it is not long before we will begin the forty days of Lent. So it's a turning point, in more ways than one.

A candle flame is particularly suitable as a symbol for the Christ-child presented in the temple. It is a source of light, but one that is vulnerable. One thinks it might easily be extinguished, but instead it sheds a huge amount of light around it, though only by being consumed. The vocation to be and to carry the light requires a willingness also to embrace darkness. Simeon perceived this too: thirty-three years before Jesus hung on the Cross, Simeon warns Mary of the pain which is to come, a sword that will pierce her soul. Jesus's adult life will embody the very struggle between light and darkness. And here in church, with the joy of Christmas still fresh in our minds, in the short liturgy we will use at the end of our service, the focus of our imagination will move from the crib (which we will take down after this service) to the Cross. What Simeon discerned was that although the climax of the story might involve pain, it would nonetheless be a source of light to the whole world. We will light candles to remind ourselves that we must share that light with our world, in our time, and that the world needs it as much now as it has always done.

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



those who are being tested'. Carrying the light is the Christian vocation. And it makes all the difference in the world.

Amen.



## The Oratoire, Aix-en-Provence

Sunday, 1<sup>st</sup> March – First Sunday of Lent

Sermon preached by Christine Portman, Reader

“Give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit; and, as you know our weakness, so may we know your power to save”. The 40 days of Lent have begun and, as today’s Collect reminds us, just as Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, we’re being offered a special time for spiritual reflection.

Self-discipline, denying ourselves some of the many comforts we’ve grown used to, is not easy. But going without something we take for granted can give us heightened self-awareness, and the space to think and pray more about the meaning of our faith. If in Lent we make time to reflect on our relationship with God, we enrich our understanding of Easter.

I don’t know how you mark these 40 days. As children, the house rule was no sweets, we had to forgo the regular Friday bag of chocolates from Aunt Gladys 😊 - but as I got older the emphasis changed. Lent became less about cutting out certain things and more about trying to do something positive: joining in Lent courses, thinking about the meaning of the Christian faith, being more disciplined about daily prayer.

The Ash Wednesday readings offer a good compass for the days ahead. In Psalm 51 the man is acutely aware of his failures before God, but he doesn’t dwell on that negativity. Instead, knowing that God desires ‘truth in the inward being’, he asks ‘for a new and right spirit within me’. Jesus too urges us to take a positive approach to fasting and prayer:

“whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret;

So as we begin Lent, these words from Pope Francis may be helpful. For every fast he suggests a positive reaction:

*Fast from hurting words, and say kind words*

*Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude*

*Fast from anger and be filled with patience*

*Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope*

*Fast from worries and have trust in God*

*Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity*



*Fast from pressures and be prayerful*

*Fast from bitterness and fill your heart with joy*

*Fast from selfishness and be compassionate*

*Fast from grudges and be reconciled*

*Fast from words and be silent so that you can listen.*

So let's listen again to a familiar story: the temptation in the Garden. Notice the subtle psychology that the serpent uses with Eve. First he creates desire: 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"? He knows she'll think she's smarter than the serpent and just have to contradict him!

Once he has her off guard, he can offer 'friendly' information about the forbidden tree: 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' Far from being a loving Father, God has lied to you Eve: I can show you a better way to live.

By taking the serpent's word, what is Eve doing here? She's doubting the goodness and the wisdom of God. This is the sin of pride: she relishes the idea of herself and Adam as God's equals. The more we feel in control, the less important God becomes. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is so seductive because she imagines it will make them independent - but in fact, she's fallen for a lie. Thinking herself strong, in reality she's a victim.

As St. Paul explains, when Jesus resisted temptation, his obedience was a far more powerful act than the disobedience of Adam and Eve. "For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more, **surely**, have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ". There is tremendous strength in his obedience: he shows us the way back to life with God. He faces the same test as Adam and Eve, but he shows us it's possible to overcome the temptation.

I read an excellent commentary on this by Sarah Heaner Lancaster. She says: 'Sin assumes we are independent of God, and so it takes us out of relationship with God.' St Paul talks about the death which came into the world with Adam's sin. This death "exposes the limits of our independence and the falseness of devotion to things of our own creation".

Jesus is physically starving in the desert whilst Adam and Eve have everything they need in their little Eden. But it's Jesus who, in his need, remains fully conscious of his dependence on God. The devil flatters him by calling him, rightly, the Son of God - but Jesus replies **Man** cannot live by bread alone.

Giving up something we're used to during Lent can put us outside our comfort zone and sharpen our sense of what is really important. Yet for every giving up, every abstention, there is, as Pope Francis suggests, a mirror image - a possibility of positive response. Giving up hurting words will create space for kindness to blossom. Fasting from pessimism will open up a way to hope. Listening carefully to the Lenten scriptures can allow them to speak to us more clearly in the here and now.

Looking at the Genesis reading for today, I was really struck by what our disobedience has done to our world. I read it and heard Joni Mitchell's song: "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot." The Garden of Eden speaks to me today about what we've done to our paradise. We constantly hanker



after better things, to manage the world around us to our personal advantage. Have we actually created an improved paradise? We're starting to understand how so many very clever inventions that make life easy and more exciting are having uncomfortable consequences - not just for us but for all life with whom we share our world.

As Pope Francis' words show, one of the most positive things we can incorporate into our Lent meditations is to think about how we can make a personal difference by changing our behaviour. So if we're concerned about the effects of plastics, let's not be consumed by pessimism. Rather, take some positive action: stop buying water or milk in plastic bottles. If we're worried about the negative impact of travelling, we might resolve to drive and fly less, buy more locally, buy fewer products from the other side of the world. Some people will say simple actions like these are a pointless drop in the ocean. That those who try to make a difference are just doing it to feel less guilty. But don't give in to this kind of pessimism: individuals start a general change of attitude. Positive action can become infectious - and a road back to a more hopeful world. As the Genesis verses say: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." Perhaps one way of returning to obedience may be to take seriously our role as keepers of this world for the generations who follow us.

Adam and Eve thought that God had lied to them when he said: "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." The times we are living through show us that God was simply speaking the truth to them: the consequences of turning away from His way are both spiritual and material death.

This week, completely out of the blue, I found a wonderful gift in my postbox. If anyone here is responsible for it, and I have my suspicions 😊, I sincerely thank you - because in the true sense of the word, it's a **lovely** gift: a collection called Love Poems from God .

So I'll end by quoting from one of the poets, Hafiz - a 14th century mystic poet from Persia:

"God said, 'I am made whole by your life. Each soul, each soul completes me.'"

Let's use this Lent as a time of repentance and reflection, and of positive reconnecting with the love that created us. Accepting these weeks as a God-given time to bring ourselves back into that loving wholeness by whom, with whom and in whom we have our being.

Amen





## **All Saints' Marseille**

### **Sermon**

**Sunday, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2020**

**First Sunday of Lent**

**Year A: Genesis 2.15-17; 3.1-7; Romans 5.12-19; Matthew 4.1-11**

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

I once had dinner with someone I didn't know well, who half way through the meal said: 'Complete this sentence: everything would have been different if...'  
It was an intriguing question. We all have moments in our lives when our world turns, and our future moves in one direction rather than another, for better or for worse. I wonder what your moments have been.

Our reading from Genesis is one of the best-known scenes in the Bible. In theological circles it often prompts a discussion of the doctrine of original sin, which may be interesting to theologians but tends not to trouble most people as they go about their daily lives. Yet there is profound psychological and social truth in the idea that so often we do not feel free. People often feel constrained to do, and to be, less than they would wish, and we are all born into webs of relationships, some of them damaging, that dictate our choices. What has been called this 'depressing little scene' of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden plays out over and over again through human history. 'It wasn't me, it was her.' 'It wasn't my fault, it was that thing.' 'I'm not responsible, it's because of what's been done to me.' 'I was only obeying orders.'



Yet we do have agency. We have choices. The psychologist Victor Frankl was once asked how he had survived mentally while interned at Auschwitz during the Second World War. He replied: ‘Between the stimulus and the response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.’ He was saying that it is possible to control our reactions, even in extreme circumstances.

We have choices. We are capable of something better than we often manage – capable of a response of compassion and generosity that is so beautiful that it’s as if it comes from beyond us. Lifting us out of our self-absorption and connecting us to one another and the creation in ways that can surprise those around us, even ourselves. It’s the response of unconditional love. You see it in times of crisis when people perform acts of goodness and generosity. You see it when people place themselves in danger to save others. For Christians, it speaks of the notion that we are ‘made in the image of God’.

Paul, in today’s passage from his Letter to the Romans, suggests that Adam’s response in the Garden of Eden opens up the possibility of sin to all of us. Sadly, we often use our choices selfishly and stupidly, as Adam did. More importantly, though, Paul is saying that God in Christ is at work to give us back our freedom.

‘Between the stimulus and the response there is a space.’ In his temptations in the wilderness Jesus offers us guidance how to use that space well. Immediately after his baptism, when he received the affirmation: ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased’, Jesus goes into the wilderness, ‘led by the Spirit’. Creating time and space to respond to the promptings of God. Working out what it means for him to live into the promise he has discerned. To be tested.

Matthew's hearers would have understood the reference to the wilderness as a place of testing. The ancient Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years



before entering the promised land. In the Jewish mystic tradition, the number forty is associated with preparation for transformative change. Moses went up on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights. Jesus was in the wilderness, fasting for forty days and forty nights. Like Moses, this is one through whom God's purposes will be revealed. More than Moses, this is the one in whom they will be embodied.

There is more than one way in which we can reflect on the temptations of Jesus.

One commentator has noted that what Jesus faced in the wilderness were the temptations that would snap at his heels throughout his ministry - the temptation to focus on earthly needs rather than their heavenly roots, the temptation to be spectacular rather than consistent, the temptation to take short cuts rather than to put God first in everything. The fact that he was having to deal with these temptations throughout his life is illustrated in the battle he still had with them in Gethsemane.<sup>1</sup>

Another way of reflecting on the temptations of Jesus is to notice that they are also the temptations of illusion. If Jesus were to approach things in one way, he would be giving in to illusion. If, however, he remains faithful to God, fixed on God and trusting in God's faithfulness, he will be truly God's Son. The tempter offers him prosperity, security and power - all the kingdoms of the world, even though the tempter is in no position to deliver them. Jesus, in reply, mines the wisdom of the Scriptures and asserts instead that everything comes from God, on whom we wholly depend. When the tempter offers Jesus power in exchange for worship, the tempter betrays his own desire. He longs to be God or, at least, to have what he imagines God has, because the tempter is as taken in by his own illusions as are Adam and Eve. The tempter lives in a world of illusions, longing

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<sup>1</sup> John Pritchard, *Reflections for Sundays*, Church House Publishing (2016), p 87.



to be what he is not, hating what he sees as his own incompleteness, just as he persuades Adam and Eve to hate theirs. Only Jesus is content to be what he is, God's beloved Son. In Romans, Paul writes of the destructive effect of living in a world of illusions, and how what breaks through the web of deceit, what breaks through the anxiety and determination to have what we think we deserve, is God's own self-gift. In the world of illusions there is nothing about giving yourself away out of love. And so in Christ, Paul says, the illusions of sin come to an end.

Letting go of illusions is hard. But when we encounter the gracious, self-giving God whom Jesus knew so intimately as to call *Abba*, Father, then by wonderful irony we find that we already are what we have longed to be: precious and made in his image. We are not incomplete after all. We are whole. Freed from the illusion of lack.<sup>2</sup>

As Christians, we already have what we need to find happiness in God's creation. We are adopted as God's children through our baptism. We are accepted, loved. All God longs for is that we come back to him when we go astray. Some of you will know the painting by Rembrandt called *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. If you have never seen it, may I encourage you to Google it. It is a beautiful portrait of forgiveness, a parent enfolding a child – a grown-up child – in arms of love and compassion. It is a good image to keep beside us through Lent, a focus for prayer and reflection as we contemplate it. This is the God we are dealing with – running towards us, putting arms round us and saying: 'It's OK. I love you for who you are, not who you think you ought to be.' Freed from the illusion of lack.

And so, like Jesus, our identity is challenged, and to a significant extent formed, in times of difficulty. As Christians, we are blessed by our baptism with identity

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections*, SPCK (2011), pp 44-45.



as children of God. That identity asks of us who we really are. How do we live it out, especially in times of difficulty? Perhaps that may help us in the time of testing which all countries are now facing as a result of the Covid-19 epidemic. How will we respond? With fearfulness, or with love, generosity and compassion?

Lent is a good time, too, to reflect on what our temptations are, the things that snap at our heels. How can we address them so that they lose their power over us? How can we adjust our responses, staying closer to God and further from the knee-jerk responses that cause damage, to ourselves and to others? These are good questions to ask ourselves, as we prepare to witness again to Jesus confronting the worst of which humanity is capable and yet prevailing over it, revealing for all time and every place the unconquerable power of the love of God.

Amen.



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

*8<sup>th</sup> March 2020  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent  
Nicodemus  
All Saints Marseille*

Sermon preached by Revd John Smith

I have brought this stool as I want to tell you a story. I want to tell you my story.

I really did want to see Jesus to find out for myself who He was.

He was making such an impact on our community, more than an impact I should say for only a few weeks earlier he had stormed into the Temple with a whip of cords and driven out the oxen, sheep, pigeons and goats; all the animals that people needed to make their various sacrifices. He also chased out the money changers with the same whip, emptied their coin baskets and overturned their tables. That in of itself was extraordinary but as he was chasing the money changers out of the temple he said *"Take these things away. Do not make my Father's house a house of trade"*. What He said struck me more than what He did. Was He really claiming to be the Son of God as the gossipers were claiming in the rumours they spread? When we questioned Him by whose authority He was doing these things, He gave us an obscure answer about rebuilding the temple in three days even though it had taken forty-six years to build it. Some of us thought He was a hooligan, some thought He was a comedian, and others thought He was mad.

I really did want to see Jesus to find out for myself who He was.

I am comfortably off financially. I am a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme council or court in Israel. We meet every day except feast days and Sabbaths to discuss and decide matters of the Law. The Chief Priest presides over the Sanhedrin. I have studied the law many years and I am well respected and considered to be a leader in the Sanhedrin. I did not tell anybody that I was going to see Jesus. I chose to go and see Him after we had finished our business in the Sanhedrin for the day. There were less people around as I wanted some extended time with him and I did not want to be interrupted. Besides it was a cooler time of day.

When I met Him, I called him Rabbi for I truly saw Him as a teacher and a master. I told Him that He could only do the things that He was doing and have the wisdom that He spoke with if that power had come from God. His answer was most unexpected. He said *"no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born from above"*. Now I knew He did not mean that we have to be physically born again so I asked Him, "can a person enter into his mother's womb a second time?" in order to have him explain more. He then said that *"nobody could enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit for what is born of the flesh is of the flesh and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."* I must have looked perplexed as I was perplexed and I asked "how can these things be?" to which Jesus said *"are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not know these things?"*

I fell silent as He said quite gently, that He had told us earthly things but we had not believed those things so how were we ever likely to believe heavenly things? He went on to explain that just as our patriarch Moses lifted up the bronze serpent on a pole in the wilderness to save the people from dying when they were bitten by snakes, so the Son of Man must be lifted up so that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. Now unlike the Sadducees who are in the minority on the Sanhedrin, we Pharisees believe in life after death. Jesus continued with the most striking words. *"God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten son that whoever believes in him may have eternal life"*. And that *"God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him may be saved. Those who believe in Him are not condemned but those that do not believe are condemned already"*.

This was all a great shock to me because I had kept the Ten Commandments and obeyed every aspect of the law every day since a child. I came to Jesus thinking my future on this earth and the next was secure but now Jesus was telling me that I am a condemned man and the only way to eternal life is believing that Jesus is the Son of God. That left me lots to think about

The next time I had anything to do with Jesus was when the High Priests wanted to arrest him. They sent the temple guards to get him but they listened to what Jesus was saying and were completely captivated by Him. They returned without Jesus. This got the High Priests excited and a little angry but I, being a student and respecter of the law, asked *"Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?"* As they could not answer my question without condemning themselves, they tried to insult me by asking if I was from Galilee too.

Eventually things got so out of hand with this man Jesus that he was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin where he was found guilty of several offenses against our law. Jesus was handed over to the Roman authorities who ordered his execution and he was crucified along with two rogues. My friend Joseph who lived in Arimathea, originally a Levite city situated close to Mount Ephraim and the birthplace of Samuel the last of the Hebrew judges, came to see me. He said that he had been to see Pilate to ask if he could remove the body of Jesus from the cross. After Pilate had consulted the centurion to see if Jesus was dead, he agreed and Joseph wanted help to remove the body. I thought he was very brave so I decided I would help him. He also asked me to bring some myrrh and aloes to embalm his body. I took as much as I could, over 30 kilograms, enough to embalm a king.

I can't tell you what my feelings were as we removed the nails from the hands and feet of Jesus and we bore the full weight of Jesus as we lowered him from the cross. At that moment I remembered Jesus talking about the need for His body to be lifted up for people to have everlasting life. We carried His body less than a hundred metres from Calvary to a new tomb that Joseph had prepared some time ago. We wrapped the body of Jesus in strips of linen. As I looked at that very dead corpse I stopped and wondered whether I would see him again in this life or the next.

Oh, I am sorry, I realise that I have told you all my story but I have not told you my name. I am Nicodemus

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There is a lot we do not know about Nicodemus. But what a shock he received. A man who came to Jesus believing that he would enter the kingdom of God because he kept the Ten Commandments and obeyed every point of the law, leaves Jesus as a condemned man. What Nicodemus had not realized was that the law was a way of life for the redeemed not a way of salvation for the lost. We are not told whether Nicodemus was convinced, whether he was convicted and whether he was converted. In a way it does not matter whether Nicodemus was born again but it does matter very much whether we are born again, whether we accept Jesus as our only means of salvation.

And I would add one thing more. It took a while for Nicodemus to come out of the dark but God was patient with him. When you give your life to Christ, God does not expect instant perfection. He looks for steady growth. I don't know when each of you came to know Christ but my question for you today is: how well does your current level of spiritual growth match up to how long you have known Jesus?





## **Eglise du Sacré-Coeur, Oppède**

### **Sermon**

**Sunday, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2020**

**Second Sunday of Lent**

**Year A: Genesis 12.1-4a; Romans 4.1-5, 13-17; John 3.1-17**

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

I wonder if any of you have ever been to Iona, the island off the west coast of Scotland where St Columba first brought the Christian faith from Ireland in the sixth century. It's the site of a medieval abbey which by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had fallen into ruin. In the 1930s, George Macleod, a Church of Scotland minister working in a poor district of Glasgow, had the idea of rebuilding Iona Abbey, offering activity to people from the city who were unemployed, working alongside students and other volunteers. The movement became the Iona Community, now an international ecumenical body.

The island is a beautiful place, with an atmosphere that's special. It has both an ancient sense of the sacred and a modern, radical ethic. It offers both deep peace and a sense of challenge. George Macleod called Iona a 'thin' place, where the division between the spiritual and the material, the things of heaven and earth, feels very thin.

I have a particular affection for Iona, for I went there around fifteen years ago when my sense of vocation to be ordained was becoming increasingly insistent and I needed time and space to decide whether or not to approach the church



about it. I took the journey from London, and having set off before dawn arrived in the evening to find there was a late-night Eucharist in the Abbey. I walked in, giving thanks for the fact that I now had four uninterrupted days to think about vocation, weighing up the pros and cons of taking a step that might result in a radical alteration to my life. The service was beautiful and still, the thinness of the place tangible. When the time came to go up for Communion, I waited for a space at the altar rail, whereupon a man got up from it, turned round and walked towards me. He was wearing a Nike sweatshirt. In that moment I saw the answer I had travelled so far to find, and I didn't have to wait four days. The shirt said: 'Just do it.'

The symbol of the Iona Community is a wild goose, which is how the ancient Celts saw the Holy Spirit. It's a contrast to the more tranquil dove usually found in Christian symbolism. The Celts perceived how the Holy Spirit has a tendency to disrupt and surprise, moving our lives in unexpected ways like the actions of a wild goose. Those actions are not unlike the characteristics of the Spirit to which Jesus refers in our Gospel reading this morning: 'It blows where it chooses.'

In our reading we encounter Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, the highest governing religious body. He comes to Jesus by night, as he is fearful about being seen with him. Yet there is something about the teacher from Nazareth that attracts him. The older man wants to understand his teaching, but he is held back by his own traditional and literalist thinking. John's reference to 'night' is not just about secrecy. In his Gospel there is constant interplay between light and darkness. Night, for the writer, is the place of confusion and doubt. Jesus talks to Nicodemus almost playfully, teasing him into broadening and deepening his understanding: 'Are you a teacher and don't understand these things?' Jesus also plays on the double meaning of a word that in both Greek and



Hebrew means ‘wind’ as well as ‘spirit’. He encourages Nicodemus to see that an encounter with the Spirit of God is life enhancing, unpredictable, exhilarating.

There’s another play on words when Jesus refers to being born ‘from above’. The phrase in Greek can also mean being born ‘again’. Nicodemus lights on the second meaning: ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old?’ But Jesus refers to the other meaning, ‘from above’. This highlights another pair of contrasts in John’s Gospel, between earthly and heavenly things. We are being shown that if we become open to the creative power of the Spirit of God, everything changes. It is mysterious – like the wind, we don’t know where it comes from. Yet most of us can recall moments in our lives when we have experienced a sense of something heavenly, of transcendence – a sense that there is a dimension to existence of which we are not often aware but which, when we encounter it, feels like something we can trust. The poet Wordsworth called it:

‘A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.’<sup>1</sup>

John’s Gospel assures us that to be ‘born of the Spirit’ is to receive God’s gift of eternal life, not just beyond death but a transformed mode of life now – life in the dimension of the eternal. Paul, in his Letter to the Galatians, refers to the gifts of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,

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<sup>1</sup> *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*



gentleness, and self-control.<sup>2</sup> These are what follow, and what others can experience in their dealings with us, if we allow the Spirit to work within us.

The reference to being born of ‘water and Spirit’ is a reference to Baptism, to which members of the community for whom John was writing would come after beginning their journey of faith. For our response to the Spirit of God, says John, is faith.

Nicodemus is still in the dark. Doubt is necessary for faith to grow, but sometimes it can immobilise us. Christ calls us to step from doubt into belief – from darkness to light - accepting his word and receiving his Spirit. As he puts it: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’ The unconditional love of God is for the world – inclusive, for all - a wild goose of an experience that changes everything. And faith is our response to it.

Nicodemus often gets a bad press, as John deliberately contrasts his cautious approach by night with Jesus’s next encounter, which takes place in broad daylight. (This is with the woman at the well - a Samaritan, with no religious credentials. In contrast to the religious leader, she immediately testifies of Jesus.) Yet we must not condemn Nicodemus, because he appears twice more in John’s account: once in the Council, defending Jesus’s right to a fair hearing, and once near the end, when he and Joseph of Arimathea come to prepare Jesus’s body for burial. So perhaps his journey, which began in darkness and doubt, does after all end in faith. Like the writer of the Gospel, he has seen the *logos*, the creative power of God, which was in the beginning and through which all things came into being, made flesh in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Galatians 5.22-23



Some of us are gathering in small groups during Lent to study the Beatitudes, the sayings of Jesus which appear at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. We are discovering how revolutionary they are. As baptised Christians, born of water and the Spirit, we are called to live out the Beatitudes - to hunger and thirst for justice, to be merciful, to be compassionate, and to live life as a gift. It can be liberating, freeing us from self-absorption, turning us outwards so that we are freed to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbours as ourselves. That is why fishermen left their nets on the beach for this extraordinary teacher. For he placed before them a vision of freedom that is nothing less than the kingdom of God.

It's a good vision to hold onto in these troubled times, when we are having to learn to live more provisionally because of the coronavirus epidemic. We cannot plan or control things in the way we would like, for we do not know what we will be allowed to do in a few weeks' time. But we do have choices. God in Christ gives us freedom, and that raises the question how we are to respond to things like this. With fearfulness? Or with courage, compassion, generosity and love? Perhaps, as Jesus teaches us, we should learn to allow the wind of the Spirit to blow where it chooses, praying that we may receive and share its fruits. Follow the wild goose in all its unpredictability, trusting in the Word made flesh who lived among us, and in the one he called *Abba*, Father. Trusting in the Trinity of Love who is the source of everything, the one God who is above us, beside us and within us, and who will never let us go.

One more thing about Iona. Some years after my visit I discovered that it's also a word in Hebrew (*Jonah*) which means ... a dove. It is a place where the Spirit



of God can be felt. I recommend you go there. You never know what might happen.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity – 9<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

**Service at All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

Last week we saw how the accounts of Jesus's miracles operate on different levels. We saw too how the miracle stories carry echoes of Old Testament scriptural texts, meditating on how prophecies were being fulfilled, using symbolism to apply in a present context truths understood from the past. Matthew's Gospel includes two miracles involving the sea: the one in which Jesus is asleep in the boat with his disciples and, when woken by them in fear of drowning, calms the wind and the waves; and the one today where he walks towards them on the water and tells them not to be afraid.

In the Old Testament, the sea was a symbol of chaos and evil, over which the Spirit of God moved at the beginning of creation. The prophets and psalmists, writing at times of distress and persecution, would often recall what God had done for his people in the past, asking him to show his power in the present. Psalm 89, verse 8 states: 'You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them'; and in Psalm 77.19-20 we read: 'Your way was through the sea, your path through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron'. The writers recall not only God ruling over the waters of chaos in creation, but also the Exodus in which his people were led to freedom.

In Matthew's Gospel, we are being shown that here is the long-awaited Messiah, who will lead God's people once more to freedom, facing down the powers of chaos and evil. Coming straight after the feeding of the five thousand, with its echo of Moses feeding the Israelites in the desert, here is Jesus – again, like Moses – walking through the sea, leading his people to freedom. Yet Matthew is also saying that this is *more* than a new Moses. In the English translation the words are: 'Take heart: it is I; do not be afraid', but in the original Greek it says: 'Take heart: I AM (*ego eimi*, the divine name revealed to Moses)'. Matthew is pointing to Jesus's intimate connection with Yahweh, the one who when asked his name replied 'I AM who I AM', the source and end of all that is. When Jesus gets into the boat with them, the astonished disciples say: 'Truly you are the Son of God'. We will hear those words again at the end of the story, spoken by the centurion at the foot of the Cross.

Although the miracle of Jesus walking on the water also appears in the Gospels of Mark and John, Matthew's account adds the scene of Peter getting out of the boat to walk towards Jesus - starting to walk, then noticing the strength of the wind and feeling his courage fail. How easy it is to identify with Peter in this scene. We have all known times when we felt confident about our faith – ready to walk towards Christ on the water - and other times when disaster or danger has brought us up short and we have felt very small and very alone, buffeted by a storm and starting to sink. It's a very human story.

If we meditate on the miracles of Jesus, perhaps even imagining ourselves in the scenes, sometimes we notice different things. One thing struck me this week in re-reading Matthew's account. We tend to think of Peter's attempt to walk on



water in terms of impetuosity and failure. 'Why did he even attempt it? He's not Jesus. He ought to have known better.' And he receives a rebuke: 'You of little faith.' But if we think about the real nature of the rebuke, Matthew certainly records Jesus on several occasions challenging the disciples for being of 'little faith'. But elsewhere he records him encouraging them that to have 'a little faith', even as small as a mustard seed, is enough to move mountains. Perhaps, therefore, the rebuke is a gentle one. For Jesus doesn't say to Peter: 'why did you think you could walk on water?' but 'why did you doubt that you could?'

Jesus knows Peter better than Peter knows himself. From the beginning he tells him he is the rock on which he will build his church. Yet he knows that Peter is prey to the fears that affect all of us when the going gets difficult. He foretells the denial in the courtyard of the high priest. But Jesus knows, too, that Peter is capable of more, and better, than what happened in the courtyard. At the lakeside after the resurrection he restores him with the forgiveness that only Christ can give: 'Feed my sheep'. And the fact that, two thousand years later, I am giving this talk and you are listening to it, shows that Peter did.

Perhaps the point of Matthew's addition to the story is that discipleship is not about running away from difficulty - huddled in the boat with the other disciples - but walking towards it. This is what Christ wants us to do, loving our neighbour unconditionally and doing our part to build his church on the rock that Peter proved to be. We mustn't feel failures if we panic and stumble. It is not easy to hold on to courage in a storm. But this miracle story assures us that Christ will be there to catch us when we fall. The words that Jesus says, even before Peter

steps out of the boat, are for all of us, and for all time: 'Take heart; do not be afraid: I AM.'

For Christians the world over, this story is still powerful. Even if we no longer think of the sea itself in terms of chaos or evil, the notion of the storm still works well as an image for the emotional, mental or spiritual turmoil we all experience at times. Peter did stumble, losing heart and calling out to Jesus to save him, but ultimately he found himself held by Christ. And 'when they got into the boat, the wind ceased.'

This Friday, 14<sup>th</sup> August, the church commemorates St Maximilian Kolbe, the Polish priest who died on that day in Auschwitz in 1941. A prisoner had escaped from the camp and, in order to discourage further escape attempts, the authorities chose ten men to be starved to death in an underground bunker. One of the men who was initially chosen cried out that he had a wife and children, at which point Kolbe offered to take his place. In the bunker Kolbe led the prisoners in prayer and was the last to survive, so they gave him a lethal injection because they wanted it over. Kolbe is said to have raised his arm and waited calmly for the injection. I wonder if he ever thought of Christ's words: 'Take heart; do not be afraid: I AM.'

Those words can still bring calm to our storms if, however hesitantly, we are able to hold on to the assurance that Jesus 'is who he is': 'Take heart, do not be afraid: I AM.' May it be so for us, eighty years on, in these times of turmoil.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity – 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2020**

**Service at All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

'Who do you say that I am?' The question Jesus asked his disciples is one that we need to ask ourselves today. In our hearts and minds, who do we believe Jesus to be? And what sort of testimony do we offer of him through our words and actions, our loves and our lives – as individuals, and as a church community? What will others discover of him through us?

The question comes at a turning point in the Gospel, both literally and metaphorically. Jesus and his disciples have reached the northernmost point of their journey, as they travel to spread the good news of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Caesarea Philippi, almost on the border of Syria, had Gentile associations. The Roman Emperor, Augustus Caesar, had given the town to Herod the Great at around the time of Jesus's birth. Herod had named it Caesarea in acknowledgement of the gift, and Herod's son Philip had added his own name to it after the death of the emperor. Yet it is here, as far from Jerusalem as the disciples are recorded as travelling, that they are asked the question who it is that they are following. And it is once they have given their answer that the narrative turns and the long journey towards Jerusalem will begin, culminating in Jesus's suffering and death.

Jesus begins by asking the easier question: who are other people saying he is? The disciples list the various answers they have heard along the way. In Matthew's account their answers help prepare the ground for the transfiguration which occurs in the following chapter. The replies - John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets – name important individuals who have announced key points in the history of salvation.

Names are always important in Scripture. They disclose something about the roles people are to play in the unfolding of salvation. We saw a few weeks ago how Jacob was renamed Israel. The names of Jesus and of John the Baptist are announced by angels to their mother and father respectively. One of the key moments in the Old Testament is when Moses asks God for his name and God appears to elude the question. To know someone's name is to have power over them, and no one can have that power over God. In the Jewish tradition God's reply to Moses, 'I am who I am', is never spoken aloud.

Yet in our Gospel reading today Jesus questions his disciples about his own identity. He puts them on the spot: who do you say I am? And it is Simon Peter who responds: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' In these momentous words, Jesus is recognised and named for who he is. They mark a turning point in his mission, as he turns towards Jerusalem. They also mark a turning point in humanity's understanding of the divine. For we are dealing with a God who no longer keeps his distance, guards his identity, but has come among us as one like us.

Jesus responds to this recognition with blessing: ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.’ And this is when he names Simon ‘*petros*’, the rock on which the church will be built. It is a new name, a new identity. Like the identity each of us receives in baptism.

‘Who do you say that I am?’ It’s a question we need to keep asking ourselves, as individuals and as a church. When we think of Jesus, how does it alter the way we respond to things that happen to us? Does it alter the way we interact with others? How are we to discern his call on our lives? If we can focus on these questions, we will find ourselves in turn asking Christ what name he gives to us. Who does he say we are? As Paul points out in our epistle, the contribution that each of us makes as followers of Jesus will be different. But we need to work out what it should be. We do have a unique contribution to make and each of our names is known to God. As Isaiah puts it: ‘thus says the Lord, he who created you...: I have called you by name, you are mine’ (Isaiah 43.1). And not only is this a question about our vocation, the vocation that each one of us has as a follower of Christ, but it is a matter of the whole of God’s salvation history being brought close to each of his creatures. For the full quotation is this:

‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.  
<sup>3</sup> For I am the LORD your God, ... your Saviour.  
... you are precious in my sight,  
and honoured, and I love you.’

Peter's understanding of Jesus's identity is that he is the key to God's relationship with all that he has made. With that knowledge, the gates of Heaven stand open to his followers and they may be unafraid of Hades. That's quite a claim, but it is the promise that has been handed on to us. The way will not be easy, as we shall discover next week from the verses that follow in this chapter of Matthew's Gospel.

But for now, at the furthest extremity of their journey, the disciples have the clarity to see that the promised answer to their people's prayer has arrived. As the fourth evangelist puts it, the Word has been made flesh and is living among them, and they have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity – 30<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

**Service at All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

It's a week since we heard Peter utter those words in response to Jesus's question who he thought he was: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God', followed by Jesus's affirmation of his friend: 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. ... You are *petros*, and on this rock I will build my church ... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven'. But immediately afterwards in Matthew's account we find today's Gospel reading, in which Jesus is suddenly saying to Peter: 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me.' What happened?

From the moment his closest followers identify him as the Messiah, Jesus is at pains to explain to them that his vocation is one that will involve rejection, suffering and death. Peter is disturbed by this, probably for a combination of reasons. Perhaps the impact on his own life of knowing Jesus is such that he cannot imagine that impact not being felt by others, so the idea of a wholesale rejection in Jerusalem seems not only unlikely but something to be resisted. Perhaps a part of him still clings to the widely held understanding that messiahship will involve political salvation, combined with a renewal of the ancestral faith and the overthrow of the hated Roman occupier. Perhaps part

of his response is simply what anyone would say to a friend who predicts their own imminent death: 'God forbid! This must never happen to you.'

Whatever the combination of reasons, Peter must think he is being supportive to Jesus by what he says, yet he gets an extreme reaction. For Jesus, Peter's words are an echo of the temptations he fought off in the wilderness, when he withdrew after his baptism by John in order to work out what his vocation was to mean. Throughout his ministry, Jesus resists any interpretation of his identity as Messiah being viewed in terms of status, power and wealth, those drivers of identity in the world around him. He does not want people even to know that he is the Messiah until they are able to understand how different his mission is from their expectations. His notion of messiahship has nothing to do with the politico-military figure which popular belief had come to expect, but draws much more on the figure of the suffering servant in the prophecy of Isaiah. Jesus is well aware of the temptations of status and power which also affect his followers. But he knows too that they will learn from his walking the way of the cross, and that after his lifetime their mission will be to follow in those steps, as they walk the way of life in the power of his Spirit.

The African concept of *ubuntu* reflects an ancient understanding of what it means to be human: 'I am because we are.' The individual cannot exist alone. We owe our existence to others, including those of past generations as well as those amongst whom we live. We are part of a whole. The community creates the individual, and the individual depends on the group. We see this at work in our own communities, though we don't have a word for it like *ubuntu*. 'No man is an island entire of itself', said John Donne.



The conversation between Jesus and Peter is one of those moments when identity is understood between two people. Each shares his insights with the other, affirms the other's identity and prepares the other for the ministry which lies ahead. Jesus and Peter help each other to assume their rightful identities. This is the principle expressed by *ubuntu*: 'I am because we are.' Our anthem today, Alan Paton's Prayer from South Africa, speaks from that insight. Jesus knows Peter will grow and face the truths of what must come, ultimately developing the strength to found and maintain the church which will bear Jesus's name.

Jeremiah understood that a life of faith is not a life without struggle. His vocation was to proclaim unwelcome truths, and he suffered deeply for it. Yet God promised to be with him through it, a sustaining presence through the time of trial. It's the same promise that is made to anyone who bears faithful witness through opposition. 'They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the Lord.' It's something the disciples finally understood in the light of the resurrection.

This week I moved into a new apartment. As ever, there were frustrations – things promised and not done, small things seeming out of proportion, big things seeming insurmountable, culminating in the usual promise to oneself never to do this again. Against that background it was particularly salutary for me to read Paul's words in our epistle today. The passage from his Letter to the Romans is a wonderful reminder of the behaviours to which we are called as followers of Christ. 'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ... If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.'

‘Do not repay anyone evil for evil.’ Paul’s words echo those of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. ‘But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’. In my former life as a lawyer I once had a particularly bruising encounter with another member of the profession. That evening I was ruminating on the conversation, not knowing how to unload the sense of hurt. I needed to sleep but couldn’t unwind. Then I remembered the words from Matthew’s Gospel which say (in the King James version): ‘Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you’. So I did, and the strangest thing happened. The hurt evaporated, I had some sense of the woundedness of the person who had wounded me, and I felt completely at peace, all within minutes. I was aware that I had tapped into something much stronger than myself.

‘Do not repay anyone evil for evil.’ How much the world needs to be reminded of that. ‘Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.’ Paul was urging his readers to transform habits and attributes current in his time, which are in practice as current in ours. What Paul is describing are nothing less than the attributes that go, and come, with walking the way of the cross. For the cross is the ultimate expression of overcoming evil with good. Through it nothing and no one can do us harm. As our offertory hymn puts it, the cross is:

‘The balm of life, the cure of woe,  
the measure and the pledge of love,  
the sinner’s refuge here below,  
the angels’ theme in heaven above’.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity – 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

**Service at All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

All our readings this morning, one way or another, are about forgiveness. As Jane Quarmby pointed out in her recent reflection on the story of Joseph, his forgiveness of his brothers at the end of the Book of Genesis breaks the cycles of violence that have gone before – those stories of sibling rivalry which dominate the opening book of the Bible, reflecting much that is deep rooted in human behaviour: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers. The repeating cycles in which people compete for what they fear are finite resources, missing the point that their lives are blessed with God's abundance.

Despite the apparent restoration of relationship between Joseph and his brothers, when their father dies the brothers worry that this will be the moment Joseph seeks revenge for what they did to him. As ever, their reaction is to invent a story to protect themselves. But Joseph does something else. He shows them the extent of his vulnerability and, from that position, assures them of his forgiveness, pointing out that God's vision is greater than all of theirs.

As Christians, forgiveness is foundational to our faith. It's no accident that the central line in the Lord's Prayer is about it. And it's a good thing that clergy have to commit to saying it twice a day: 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.' Jesus's parable in our Gospel this morning is an extended meditation on that verse, using exaggerated examples to bring home his point. All of us have had the experience of being forgiven – in small ways, more significant ways, sometimes life-changing ways. From the point of view of our faith, the ultimate forgiveness we receive is on the Cross. And it has already happened, so now it is up to us how we use it.

There's a scene in *Howard's End*, the novel by E M Forster set at the turn of the twentieth century of which a Merchant-Ivory film was made, in which the idealistic Margaret Schlegel (played by Emma Thompson in the film) confronts her husband to be, the widower Henry Wilcox (played by Anthony Hopkins). It has just been discovered that Margaret's unmarried sister Helen is pregnant, and Henry is refusing to allow her to stay a night at Howard's End, citing family values: 'I have my children and the memory of my dear wife to consider.' Margaret asks him: 'Tonight she asks to sleep in your empty house... Will you give my sister leave? Will you forgive her as you hope to be forgiven, and as you have actually been forgiven?' He blusters, and she then confronts him: "'Not any more of this!" she cried. "You shall see the connection if it kills you, Henry! You have had a mistress - I forgave you. My sister has a lover - you drive her from the house. Do you see the connection? ... Men like you use repentance as a blind, so don't repent. Only say to yourself, "What Helen has done, I've done."' ' Needless to say, Henry doesn't see it that way, though Margaret does succeed in changing his way of thinking by the end of the novel.

There are two basic ways in which we can respond to receiving mercy. We can feel relieved that we have got off lightly and go on with our lives feeling a bit more defensive and a bit more mistrustful of others. Or we can look around and realise that other people are like us, that they will get things wrong too and need to be forgiven, and that we would do better to show to them the mercy we have experienced ourselves. For deep down we know that feeling resentment, bitterness and anxiety in response to the wrong that is done to us becomes, in the end, a lonely place. Feeling mercy, on the other hand, is a liberation.

I do not for one moment wish to suggest that this is a quick or an easy process. Some hurts are so devastating that they can take a lifetime to come to terms with, and even then be left unresolved. It would be profoundly insensitive (not to say hypocritical) for the church to suggest otherwise. And, of course, it is more complex than these few minutes of reflection can possibly allow. As an example of such complexity, two years ago the parents of Stephen Lawrence - the black teenager murdered in a racially motivated killing at a bus stop in South London in 1993 - were interviewed twenty-five years after his death. Stephen's father, Neville, found it hard to put into words the devastation caused to the family by the act of murder, but he said that after twenty-five years he had decided to take the hardest decision of his life, 'in order to be a Christian', and to forgive his son's killers.

Stephen's mother, Baroness Doreen Lawrence, expressed a different view. She said: 'It's very difficult to forgive somebody who's never admitted they've done anything wrong.' Baroness Lawrence commands huge respect (and I count myself as one of her admirers) for all she has done to combat racism in the United Kingdom since Stephen's death. Both parents have shown a courage and

a determination to change things for the better that will leave a lasting legacy. But, on the basis of what they each said in 2018, they had reached different places on the issue of forgiveness. It was a poignant reminder of how mercy has to go hand in hand with justice, and that justice had so often been lacking for Stephen.

But once justice has been pronounced, what then? Beyond justice lies mercy. Just as beyond forgiveness, we may also find reconciliation. Forgiveness and reconciliation are different, though closely related. In one corner of the church where I used to at in London there is a war memorial to Far Eastern Prisoners of War. In its glass case are two small blocks of wood from the Burma-Siam railway. During the War, Allied servicemen were put to work on the construction of the railway in sub-human conditions. Many died in the process, and it became known as 'Death Railway'. At a service in the church in the 1990s, fifty years on, one of the veterans commented that the time had come to let the bitterness go, as the only people it was damaging was themselves.

That is one truth about forgiveness. We get to it when we get to the point of saying: 'Am I going to let this thing dominate the rest of my life? I don't want to live like this anymore.' And when we manage that, something changes. We feel released from a burden we have been carrying without realising. At the same time, we become better able to understand the times we ourselves have been forgiven, before we became so enmeshed in our sense of being wronged.

Reconciliation is different. To forgive is to reach the point of being able to say of another person: 'I no longer want to live a life in which you take up the whole of my consciousness with how bad you were, regardless of whether or not you

say you are sorry.’ To be reconciled with someone is to reach the point of being able to say: ‘I am glad to have you in my life now, even though I am sorry about the way it began.’ The journey between the two is enormous, and often it is unrealistic even to attempt it.

One person who did attempt it was Eric Lomax, a former prisoner of war who worked on the Burma-Siam Railway. His book, *The Railway Man*, tells the story of the psychological damage he suffered, and of how long after the War he made contact with one of his interrogators, received counselling to control his urge to hunt him down and attack him, before discovering that the man had spent his own life trying to make amends for his actions during the war by speaking out against militarism. Lomax eventually went to Thailand to visit the area of the camps where he was a prisoner and meet his interrogator. He found that he was able to forgive him, and the men became friends until their deaths in 2011 and 2012. It is a remarkable story.

Recently I came across a quotation which sums up some of what I have been trying to say: ‘Forgiveness feels pain but doesn't hoard it; it allows tomorrow to break free of yesterday. It is always hard, sometimes foolish and, at its heart, God-like.’

And so let us pray:

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And help us, Lord, when we struggle to do it.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity – 4<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

**Service at All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

Our Gospel reading this Sunday is the third one in a row to use the metaphor of the vineyard. Two weeks ago we heard the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matthew 20.1-16); then last week the parable about the two sons who were asked to work in their father's vineyard (Matthew 21.28-32); and today the story of the 'wicked tenants' and the owner's son, which Jesus tells in the temple in the days leading up to his arrest.

In the Scriptures, the vineyard was frequently used as a symbol for Israel, the nation loved by God. In the song of Isaiah, part of which we heard in our Old Testament reading, Israel is referred to as the 'vineyard of the Lord of hosts'. Our Psalm today uses similar language. Isaiah highlights the difference between God's hope for his beloved vineyard and the reality of his people's actions. You really need to speak Hebrew to understand the word play, but the writer says that in place of justice (*mishpat*) the Lord has found bloodshed (*mispach*). Bloodshed in Isaiah's language often refers to social exploitation and economic oppression – allowing others to suffer when you could do something about it but don't. It is the same criticism which Jesus levels at the chief priests and Pharisees in the next chapter of Matthew, when he rebukes them for focussing



on the fine details of the Law (the tithing of herbs) while avoiding the ‘weightier matters’ of ‘justice and mercy and faith’.

Isaiah’s prophetic wordplay continues when he points out that righteousness (*tsedaqah*) has been displaced by outcry (*tseaqah*) – the cry for justice of those who suffer most when it is taken away. Isaiah’s message is that the faithlessness of God’s people will culminate in their loss of the vineyard.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus presents himself as the last of a series of messengers whom God has sent to call his vineyard back to justice. But, like the prophets before him, the son in the story is captured and killed. The ‘tenants’ Jesus is referring to are the religious leaders of his time, who were listening in as he taught in the temple. Jesus emphasises his meaning by quoting Psalm 118: the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. We find the same image in the first Letter of Peter: ‘For it stands in scripture: “See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” ’

Finally, Jesus states clearly that the Kingdom of God will be taken away from those who have rejected it and given to those who will faithfully produce its fruits – in other words ordinary people, whether Jewish or Gentile. The chief priests and Pharisees are left in no doubt that his criticisms are directed at them. They are furious, and their thoughts turn to his arrest.

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There is a danger for us in this parable, for it is too easy to find ourselves thinking ‘we are not like the wicked tenants in the vineyard’. As with that other parable Jesus tells about the Pharisee and the publican: ‘well, obviously I am not like the Pharisee’. But that’s part of the point of Jesus’s teaching. In every generation,

religious people are prone to think of themselves as holier than others, and in doing so to lose sight of the core of their faith. 'We wouldn't kill the son, would we?' Yet are we not prone to ignore Christ when he comes to us in the form of the stranger, the migrant, the person who is different, or awkward, or disruptive? Do we not crucify Christ daily in the people we don't help, the suffering people we walk past, the phone calls we don't make and the emails we don't send to people who need our love and our support? Next week we will be celebrating Harvest Festival, when we will turn our thoughts to how we have damaged the planet that has been entrusted to us and how it is the poorest who suffer through our casual misuse of it. Can we really look into the eyes of the starving and say 'there is nothing I can do'?

Another danger that lurks in the parable of the 'wicked tenants' is that down the centuries it has been used by Christians to justify different forms of scapegoating of the Jewish people. In falling into that trap, in common with societies throughout Europe from medieval times to the 1940s, and which had such devastating consequences, Christians failed to focus on the fact that Jesus's criticism was of the religious leaders in front of him, not of a whole people to whom he belonged. Fortunately, over the last fifty years, many parts of the Church have come to a better understanding of Jesus's Jewishness, and with it a better understanding of the excitement felt by the Gospel writers (especially Luke, in his two-part Gospel - the one which bears his name and the Acts of the Apostles) that in Jesus the ancient prophecy was being fulfilled - the prophecy that Israel would become a blessing to 'all the nations'. The earliest Christian writers, including Luke and Paul, had come to the realisation that this Gospel, which had started in Galilee, was for the whole world.

Meanwhile this parable stands as a reminder that the Church has done some terrible things through the ages, and unless we are vigilant it is capable of doing them still. There is no room for complacency in hearing this story, as Jesus knew when he told it with the religious leaders of his day listening in.

One thing that struck me in reading the story again was the repetitive behaviour of the 'wicked tenants'. How often we make the same mistakes, over and over again, wounding Christ each time. There is a confession which we use in some of our services that includes the words: 'We have wounded your love, and marred your image in us.' It is true. We do it all the time.

And yet... As Paul realises, Christ changes everything. Instead of the judgment we deserve, he blesses us with his love and forgiveness. By his own example of unconditional welcome, he unlocks the potential for good within us, freeing us to welcome others unconditionally too. In our daily lives we need to keep focused on Christ and forget everything that is less important. Paul writes to the church in Philippi: 'whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ.' If – when - we manage to keep focussed on our Lord, allowing his teaching to permeate our responses to what happens to us, our lives become simpler, freer and more loving.

We are heading into a winter of fear and uncertainty. Let us not shrink in on ourselves but continue to be alert to the suffering around us, near or far. Let us hold fast to Christ and, whatever is demanded of us, let us do what we can to fulfil his loving purposes. In doing so, we will find ourselves drawing closer to him, and through him to the Creator of all, of whom our Collect today says that

our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him. May they find that rest, now and always. And may we have the grace and strength to help others find it too.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – Last Sunday after Trinity – Bible Sunday – 25<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

**Service at All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

Have you ever asked yourself the question: what is the most important thing? To some it will be family, to others work, to others friendships, to others faith. The answer may be different at different times in our lives.

The context of the exchange we have just heard between Jesus and the lawyer is the gradual tightening of the noose around Jesus, as he teaches in the Temple in the days leading up to his arrest. One by one the religious authorities in Jerusalem – Herodians, Sadducees and Pharisees – challenge him, asking him questions, trying to trip him up as they wonder who this man is from the backwater of Galilee who is teaching on their patch. Today it's the turn of the Pharisees, and one of them asks: 'Which commandment in the law is the greatest?' There were 613 commandments in the Law, and the focus of the Pharisees' religious life was on keeping each one in careful detail.

We don't know what was in the mind of the lawyer who asked the question. Was it a trick question, or might it have been a genuine desire to find out what mattered most to this teacher, what lay at the heart of the kingdom of which he taught? Jesus answers from the heart of the Jewish tradition, quoting the

Scriptures: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind' – words from the Book of Deuteronomy which many would have regarded as the central commandment. But Jesus goes on - there's a second which is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself' – words from the Book of Leviticus which we heard in our Old Testament reading this morning. And then comes the punchline: 'On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets'. In other words, the whole of the Old Testament – and, by implication, the New – are summed up in these words.

That's a very suitable reading for today, which the church keeps as Bible Sunday. After all of Jesus's teaching and preaching, encounters and healing, travelling and gathering, just days before his crucifixion, he names what is most important to his mission, his ministry and the kingdom of which he taught: it is love. The narrative sweep of the Bible speaks of God calling humanity, made in his image, to be part of the divine nature, which is love. We read in the first Letter of John: 'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.' (I John 4.7-8)

Jesus's answer to the lawyer is beautiful in its subtlety. By responding to the question 'which is the greatest commandment?' by naming two things, he suggests they are two sides of the same coin. You cannot love God without loving your neighbour. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a wonderful illustration of that truth. I suspect we have all met people who are fervent in their faith but can come across as cold-hearted towards their fellow beings. Some of you will have read François Mauriac's novel *La Pharisienne* (translated

in English as *Woman of the Pharisees*), which offers a graphic portrayal of that tendency.

If we are honest, perhaps there's a bit of it in all of us who go to church. It actually involves a misguided form of self-protection – focusing too much on our piety because we don't want God to see who we really are, as we are afraid God won't like what he sees. But this is to forget the insight which we learn from Psalm 139 - 'O Lord, you have searched me and known me. ... you are acquainted with all my ways.' The psalmist describes all the ways in which we try in vain to escape from God's sight – 'If I say "Surely the darkness will cover me" ... even the darkness is not dark to you.' Yet the psalm ends with self-acceptance and humility: 'Search me, O God, and know my heart; see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting'. At the end there is an openness and trust that we have to do with a God of infinite mercy, who knows us better than we know ourselves. A God who is Love.

If we look again at Jesus's response to the lawyer who was testing him, we notice that it contains not two things, but three: in addition to loving God, we are to love our neighbour 'as ourselves'. We are given to understand that you cannot love your neighbour without loving yourself. And you cannot love yourself well until you have a sense of God and neighbour. One of the most important things we learn while we are growing up is that we are not the centre of the universe. It's a vital part of maturing, and every parent knows to their cost how hard it is to teach and to learn. But if we are to emerge into adulthood as balanced individuals, it is a necessary process. The ancients understood it well - from Greek mythology we get the word narcissism, that distortion of proper forms of care for oneself which tips into excessive need for admiration, the unremitting

search for power and a lack of empathy. There is deep wisdom in the advice to direct our love away from ourselves to the creator of all and to our fellow beings.

Yet we mustn't go too far in the other direction. We have all met people who are so focussed on the needs of others that they forget their own needs and become exhausted in the process, which in turn makes them less able to help. Perhaps there's a bit of that in all of us too some of the time. Two hundred years ago the French philosopher Auguste Comte coined the term 'altruism', which means living a life for others. Since then people have often assumed that altruism is what Christianity is all about. But altruism assumes that in order to love others more, you need to love yourself less. It takes love to be finite, a system in which if you give in one place you have to take away somewhere else. But that's not the Gospel, as we see from Jesus's reply to the lawyer in our reading today.

If you ever find yourself feeling like one of those people I have just described, try turning the words round sometimes: 'Love yourself as your neighbour'. Try thinking of yourself as the first among the neighbours God calls you to love. For God loves every one of us while still loving each of us as if we were the only one. And we are able to love others because of the way God loves us. To accept that love, we have to learn to love ourselves properly.

Love of God, love of neighbour, love of self. Jesus invites us into a triangle of commitment that, if we will allow it to, can transform our experience and enable us to feel fully alive. A habit of thought and practice which calls us to reflect when considering each issue, each action, each decision that comes our way: 'how, in this, am I loving God, neighbour and self?'



Jesus said: 'On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'  
It's all about balance, and it's all about love.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – Advent Sunday – 29<sup>th</sup> November 2020**

**Service at All Saints' Marseille and on Zoom**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

Here we are at the beginning of a new liturgical year. How different the world looks from how it looked a year ago. A disease unidentified twelve months ago has claimed 50,000 lives in France, almost 20,000 of them in the last few weeks. The Chancellor of the United Kingdom said this week that the economic impact of the pandemic has been greater than anything in over 300 years, and that the pain of it has hardly begun.

'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.' What an appropriate sentence to begin Advent. 'God, come and sort it out!' It's what a lot of people are feeling, and it's at the heart of much of our prayer. In the hospital ward. In the dementia wing. When we go for the hundredth interview and are told that someone else got the job. When the relationship ends and we feel bereft. When we are left with a feeling that life has somehow passed us by. 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.'

I was talking to a fellow chaplain this week in another part of the Diocese, who said that some of their congregation had made clear they weren't going to return to church after the lockdown - not because they were self-isolating, but because the pandemic had rocked their faith so badly that it didn't make sense any more. They couldn't understand how a God of love could watch all that was happening in the world and do nothing. It's an understandable response. I know a family who lost four members in a month in the spring. The 'why' in such cases is one of the most challenging questions any of us has to face. It's the cry written in every human heart in those moments when our lives seem to be falling apart, and we shout out in anguish. 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.'

The people Isaiah describes in our Old Testament reading have a strong sense of the absence of God. They complain that God has withdrawn from them. If only

God would behave like in the old days, rain down fire and make the mountains shake, then people would believe again and order would be restored. But the next few verses are rather more unsettling. Having shaken their fists at heaven, the people begin to see themselves as they are, and with it comes the realisation that they have some facing up to do. It's no good blaming all their pain on God. They have agency too, and what they see in the mirror is uncomfortable. This pandemic has shone light on the fact that, in societies, when resources are not distributed fairly, people will be in want and an emergency will tip them into crisis; that when spending on public services is cut for years, there will not be enough hospital beds or staff to cope with a major emergency.

Yet it's not about criticising other people's decisions: we have to look ourselves in the eye as individuals. What about the decisions we take each day, the things we do, and don't do, that cause harm or at least indifference to others? When we look deeply at our motivation and how it manifests itself in action or inaction, we are left with a sense of shame: 'all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.' One focus of the season of Advent is judgment, the judgment that comes from the sort of long cool look that we know we will receive from God at the end of it all. 'Keep awake', says St Mark, 'for you do not know when it will be'.

Isaiah's reflection concludes with the understanding that, despite all that has gone wrong for his people (in their case, exile in Babylon), they still belong to God: 'we are the clay, and you are our potter'. God has not been absent after all. In their self-absorption they have stopped recognising where he is to be found. They have been looking in the wrong places.

I wonder if sometimes we are at risk of doing the same. Much of the language about Advent is about power and glory. Early in life we form the belief that things will feel better once we are bigger and stronger. We can sometimes project those feelings onto God too. A God who is bigger and stronger than human beings can fix it for us. 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.' But that sort of invocation may be met not by the shaking of mountains, but by silence.

I am currently reading a book of Advent reflections by Carys Walsh on the poetry of R S Thomas<sup>1</sup>, the Welsh priest who wrote some of the most moving poetry on spirituality in the last century. His writing feels particularly suited to this Advent,

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<sup>1</sup> *Frequencies of God – Walking through Advent with R S Thomas*, Carys Walsh (2020).

as it is filled with not only a sense of expectation but also a sense of the elusiveness of God. One of the poems, called *Folk Tales*, puts it like this:

Prayers like gravel  
flung at the sky's  
window, hoping to attract  
the loved one's  
attention. ...

I would have refrained long since  
But that peering once  
Through my locked fingers  
I thought that I detected  
the movement of a curtain.

Sometimes when looking for God we expect something spectacular. Like the passage in the Gospel of Mark this morning, who tells us to keep alert. But for what? Last week Christine pointed out that Christ the King is not an image people always find it easy to relate to, much though it is good to be reminded of his victory over suffering and death. Perhaps we are more used to saying that we see God most fully revealed on the Cross, in vulnerable self-giving. And that is profoundly true. But there's another image of even greater vulnerability, one that is especially apt for this season: that of a new-born baby.

If you are involved in an argument with someone who is not good at listening, what's the best way to change the conversation so that they do? Sometimes if you do something unexpected, they will stop and hear you. The Incarnation, for which we begin our season of preparation today, was just that: unexpected. We tend to expect God's way of dealing with the problems of the world to be powerful and dramatic. Raining down fire and making mountains tremble. But it's not what happened. Have you noticed the effect that a new-born baby has on a group of people? It reduces them to silence. It melts their self-importance, the complex preoccupations of their adult minds, and it hasn't even said a word, because it can't. A new-born baby brings the world to a halt. It has been called the most disarming form of power in creation.

This year the world has been reminded that God doesn't always fix things in the ways we would want or expect. Sometimes God redefines what fixing means. Advent teaches us that we need to get better at looking where God is revealed,

for that is where we will find hope. This year all of us have felt vulnerable. No one has been spared the sense of life's precariousness, and for some the year has been quite simply devastating. We are not used to looking for God in vulnerability, but maybe we should. A shared vulnerability asks of us what we should do, draws out our instincts to care, our commitment to one another. It can make us kinder people, as individuals and societies.

There is expectation in the air now, in the midst of all the fear and uncertainty. There is hope next year for vaccines against the coronavirus, even if they have not arrived yet. That's an attitude of mind and heart with which Christians are familiar, for it is what Advent is about. And the ground of our faith and the source of our hope are that God did come, at Christmas, and did tear open the heavens, on Good Friday. The tearing of a curtain from top to bottom. And we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only Son of the Father, when we saw the cost of love laid bare on a cross. And three days later we learned that love can never be confined, neither by illness nor death nor anything else in all creation: that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

We will hear and live that story again in the weeks and months to come. May it once more inspire and transform us, as it always does.

Happy New Year.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – Second Sunday of Advent – 6<sup>th</sup> December 2020**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

I wonder what Babylon means for you. I wonder if there's a place you have ended up in which feels partly of your own making but from which you long to be released. For the people to whom Isaiah wrote those verses in our Old Testament reading (Isaiah 40.1-11), it meant exile and captivity and punishment and shame, dislocation and lament and longing and despair, for fifty years. Perhaps we can relate to some of those feelings this Advent. There's been a bit of Babylon in all of us since March, and it isn't over yet.

Yet suddenly, at the beginning of Chapter 40, Isaiah's hearers are told there is to be redemption and homecoming. Not only that, but the road home is going to be made easy for them – despite it being 800 kilometres of rough and mountainous terrain, 'every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill made low'. And though they are very aware of their human fragility (like grass that withers and fades), they are told that God is coming with strength and will lead them like a shepherd, carrying them if necessary, all the way home. 'Comfort, O comfort my people', says your God. You have served your term. Your penalty is paid.

It's the most beautiful vision. Like a prison door swinging open, freedom restored when you least expected it. 'A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God'. Cut to the opening verses of the first chapter of the first Gospel, Mark, and there they are again: 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'. This, we are told, some six hundred years later, is 'the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God', and that the voice in the wilderness is 'John the baptizer'. The beauty of Isaiah's vision is happening now.

I spoke last week about judgment being an Advent theme. Traditionally in the church this Second Sunday of Advent is the one on which clergy used to be encouraged to preach on judgment, as part of a series of sermons on the 'four last things': death, judgment, heaven and hell. There is more than one way of looking at the four last things. Last Saturday I attended an online retreat for Advent run by the Church Times, which included a talk by Mark Oakley, the priest and author who served in the Diocese some years ago as Archdeacon of Germany and Northern Europe and is now Dean of St John's College, Cambridge. He began his reflection by describing the sense of yearning which characterises Advent, as expressed in the great 'O' antiphons used at evening prayer in the week before Christmas. They each begin with the invocation 'O', reciting the attributes of Christ mentioned in the Scriptures: O Wisdom, O Lord, O Root of Jesse, O Key of David, etc. We sang them last week in our hymn, 'O Come, O Come Emmanuel' – come and be God-with-us again. 'O Come, Key of David' – unlock us, free us.

Mark Oakley suggested that the four last things can be explored in terms of our inner landscape, which in many ways the pandemic has laid bare. 'What is death? What will mine be like? What will come after? And under such pressure, how am I judged as a human being at the moment? What am I like to be with? What happens to other people in my presence? As for heaven and hell, which do I bring people closer to? Which do I live in?'

He noted that Advent is a season of longing and incompleteness, in which our words struggle to contain the hope of the Christian faith and at the same time deal with the confusions and distresses of life and the world. We long to hear the promises again, to find our way back to God. It occurs to me that this is why Advent is often paired with Lent, and why the early church looked on it as a time of penitence as they waited for the coming of Christ. The reason for our sense of yearning is the desire to be at one with God again. The word for that goal of longing is atonement (literally 'at-one-ment'), what theologians refer to as 'the work of Christ'. The closeness to God that was lost in Eden but restored to us in Jesus, who brings us back – brings us home - to God.

Mark Oakley went on to explore how the insights of the psychologist Carl Jung seem particularly relevant for the season of Advent. Jung believed that the human self, as it grows up, learns to fit in, to socialise and to keep people happy – parents, siblings, friends, teachers, bosses. In order to do this, we develop a social self, a mask, a face to present to the world. And the more we put the mask on, then the more we repress other bits of us – emotions, feelings, talents, that are part of who we are but we don't want them seen by others because we have been taught – or taught ourselves - that they are somehow unacceptable.



This can include things like permission to express emotions (tenderness, vulnerability), or to show originality, or to show ignorance, to admit we don't know things. So we become guarded versions of ourselves, with a collection of 'stuff' we carry round with us, getting heavier and heavier. This untouchable part of ourselves becomes hidden, from other people and ourselves. Jung called it the 'shadow', an essential part of us but one that we fail to integrate as part of the whole. He cautioned that it will always emerge, sometimes in unconscious acts, or when we project things – good and bad – onto others. The shadow is everything within us that hasn't been allowed expression, and it can apply to nations, groups and churches as well as individuals. Sometimes we throw onto others the unloved bits of ourselves which we try to hide or remove, and that leads to scapegoating.

Spiritually this is important, because it's about how we relate - to ourselves, to others and to God. If we can learn to integrate our shadow, the bits of us we try to hide from ourselves, we will become better at relating to others - less touchy, less prone to react sharply with people, less distrustful. It's part of learning to love our neighbour as ourselves, not hate our neighbour as ourselves. And that in turn will bring us closer to God. If we aren't trying to hide ourselves from God, like that couple in the garden long ago, we will draw closer to God in honesty and trust. We can start by looking at ourselves more honestly in these weeks leading up to Christmas.

For God in Christ comes to meet us as we are. It's part of the incalculable gift of the Incarnation. We may not feel we can tell him who we are because, if we did, he might not like us. But it was to people like us to whom Christ came, and he met them with love. We can tell him who we are, light and dark, for he is the one who will still accept us after we have told him. The process will not be easy

– Jesus warned that there will be signs of distress, confusion and fear – and we may well need help with it. But Advent is a time of the year when we are encouraged to take it seriously.

I should probably have preached to you a traditional Advent sermon about sin and separation from God and the need for repentance, a turning around. But I wonder if coming to terms with our own shadow doesn't point us in the same direction. Perhaps that's been our Babylon, from which we are being offered a way back. And the way has been prepared, for every hill and valley of the complicated ways in which we separate ourselves from God and our true selves has been removed in Christ. If we listen, we will hear the words we need for the journey: 'Comfort, O comfort my people.'

At this point I might have played you eight minutes from Handel's *Messiah*, in his unforgettable setting of those words. But they have also been encapsulated by the modern poet Michael Dennis Browne, in a setting by Stephen Paulus which Christine found for our Compline service a few weeks ago. It's called *The Road Home*. Let's hear it again now.

Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49Og75MrkV8>

Tell me, where is the road  
I can call my own,  
That I left, that I lost  
So long ago?  
All these years I have wandered,  
Oh when will I know  
There's a way, there's a road  
That will lead me home?

After wind, after rain,  
When the dark is done,  
As I wake from a dream  
In the gold of day,  
Through the air there's a calling  
From far away,  
There's a voice I can hear  
That will lead me home.

Rise up, follow me,  
Come away, is the call,  
With the love in your heart  
As the only song;  
There is no such beauty  
As where you belong;  
Rise up, follow me,  
I will lead you home.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – First Sunday of Christmas – 27<sup>th</sup> December 2020**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

There is so much in our short Gospel reading today that it's hard to know where to begin. Many of the things we have been thinking about in Advent are fulfilled in it.

First, it's full of call and response. The shepherds' response to hearing the angels' song is to say to one another 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this'. 'So they went with haste'. They reacted quicker than we are wont to react to the promptings of God. And they arrive to find the others who have responded too – Mary to the announcement of the angel, Joseph to the prompting of an angel in his dream, taking on the huge responsibility of bringing up this child. All of them way outside their comfort zone, but moving forward in faith and in trust. A reminder, if one were needed, that God needs our response and engagement in order to help build the Kingdom of heaven on earth.

Then there's the theme of exclusion. If God had wanted to make a powerful gesture in the Incarnation, he wouldn't have gone about it this way. Jesus was born not in a palace but a stable. Mary and Joseph were not people whom their society regarded as important. An artisan and his young wife, turning up and

finding all the accommodation gone, with no influence to change their circumstances. As one commentator has put it: God targets all the wrong people in all the wrong places. Mary and Joseph end up delivering the saviour of the world in a town they don't know, at the back of a pub, among people who have no idea that the one whom all Israel has awaited for centuries is sleeping in an animal food trough.

And then there are the shepherds. They were bottom of the food chain in that society. Living in the fields, they were unable to keep the religious purity laws, so were regarded as beyond the scope of respectability. No one would have taken them seriously if they had announced the coming of the Messiah.

But that is the point. It is to people whom the world regards as insignificant that the message is brought. It is to people whom society does not accept that God comes. It is to the unloved, the disregarded, the outcast and the ignored that Jesus is drawn throughout his ministry. There's a message for us in that. Whenever church finds itself excluding people, for whatever reason, it needs to ask itself the question: where is God's call in this, and what should our response be?

Then there's the passing on of the message. For we are told that the shepherds did pass it on, 'and all who heard it were amazed'. That's our task too.

And then there's Mary, treasuring all that was being said and pondering it in her heart. Thinking deeply about things, giving them her full attention. There's a message for us in that too.

But at the centre of it all, in addition to the Holy Family (whom the church celebrates on this first Sunday after Christmas) there is something else: a piece of farm equipment. Something inherently dirty – not only ritually unclean but positively dangerous to human health. But it was all there was. And the message of it is: ‘God can use even this.’ It’s a good message to be reminded of in a time of pandemic. ‘God can use even this.’ There are, after all, a few parallels.

We often hear it said that the Christmas story is really for children. This year, with all our preoccupations, it might seem anything but. It’s about disruption caused by a government introducing new rules without warning. It’s about a woman giving birth among animals. It’s about a despised group of workers being found necessary to the salvation of others. It’s about another group of outsiders - the Magi - making a mistake (by going to Jerusalem instead of Bethlehem) that leads to the loss of innocent lives. It’s about refugees and homeless people. It tells us more about uncertainty, fear and isolation than we may have noticed before. But it is also a story of hope for the world, which is why it is still being told.

God can’t work the salvation of the world unless humanity responds. As we stand on the threshold of a New Year, what are we going to do about it? We have already seen from the months of pandemic that this emergency has made us more compassionate, more grateful for things that are done for us, more aware of the people who matter to us, and the people on whom we depend. God is in the middle of this with us. How are we to respond to his call?

It's strange how what we thought was just our miserable experience turns out to be God's experience too. It's strange when we discover that our small, isolated human hurts have given us an insight into the heart of God. It's funny how a piece of farm equipment can be so eloquent.

And there's one more thing. In her beautiful reflection about Christmas in our online resources this week, Roxana Teleman has reminded us of the importance of how we approach the manger. She will, I hope, forgive me if I quote parts of it:

'We have outgrown, or at least tamed, our childhood faith, and we take pride in this. We have been filled with knowledge ... and we are jaded and think we have already seen (nearly) everything, or we are worried and fear the unknown.

Yet children can have a vivid and joyful sense of God's presence and it is this that we need to recover when we go to the manger. Otherwise, with heads too heavy with thoughts and hands weighed down with our busyness, we might not be open to recognise and marvel at the greatness of what has been granted to us ... This Child in the manger has overcome the chasm between God and humankind. Here, at the manger, begins the path to joy and thankfulness ...'

That seems to me a very good mindset with which to begin a New Year. May it be a blessed one for all of you.

Amen.