

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon

Second Sunday of Easter

24th April 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Our Gospel reading this morning begins in an unpromising place, with a group of frightened men in hiding. In the early morning Mary Magdalene has told them the news of the resurrection, but in the evening they are still in hiding, for their fear is real. They have seen the extreme violence of Jesus's crucifixion, a death reserved for those who claimed allegiance to anyone other than the Roman Emperor. And they are aware that, as his closest followers, they are on the wanted list. Psychologically, too, they are in hiding, coming to terms with the knowledge that the previous week their fear had got the better of them and they had all abandoned Jesus.

Yet the fear and the locked doors are no barrier to the risen Christ. The first thing he offers them is peace to their troubled hearts. The familiar everyday greeting, *Shalom*. The resurrection accounts are full of rehabilitation. In the scene just before this one, Mary Magdalene passes on to the disciples Christ's words to her: 'Do not hold on to me, but go to my brothers.' The one whom they had betrayed begins by calling them brothers. There is forgiveness there, reinforced when they themselves encounter the risen Christ. Peter, who denied

him three times on the night before his death, will be restored by the threefold sending: 'Feed my lambs.' 'Tend my sheep.' 'Feed my sheep.'

The assurance of peace is repeated by the risen Christ: 'Peace be with you.' But this time it is accompanied by words likely to cause them more anxiety: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' The disciples know where that sending has led Jesus – to the cross. Is that where he is sending them too? The problem with peace-making of the kind Jesus had taught them was that it was controversial. It was the sort of peace-making that gives rise to outcasts being included, the marginalised being given a place at the table, a reversal of the conventions of the last being last and the poor staying poor. Nothing less than a new way of being, the vision of a Kingdom of God where old structures are broken down and society transformed.

It was this kind of peace-making, the work of reconciliation and radical inclusion, that got Jesus into trouble. And it is no less of a threat today when it comes up against self-interest. Those who work for the inclusion of the rejected, for justice for the marginalised and oppressed, must be prepared at least to be unpopular. And yet the hope of Easter infuses everything. It enables us to say of any set of human circumstances: 'It doesn't have to be like this.' Human violence, envy, greed, exploitation, may all be confronted. For Easter confirms the promise that God's kingdom is breaking in. You only have to look at what Christians have done through the centuries in facing down evil to see it in action.

The scene in our Gospel reading leads us next to Thomas, the apostle often referred to as 'doubting Thomas'. Thomas was actually a realist, braver than many of his friends. We notice that he was not with them behind the locked

doors on that first evening after the resurrection. Apparently he had been brave enough to venture out. Weeks earlier, when Jesus was called to the home of Martha and Mary when their brother Lazarus had died, which would mean going back into Judea at a time when his life was already in danger there, it was Thomas who pointed out the risk that all the disciples would run in going with Jesus. Yet it was Thomas, too, who decided to take it: 'Let us also go, that we may die with him'. (John 11.16.) And when Jesus, preparing to face his own death, said to his followers that they knew where he is going and they therefore knew the way, it was Thomas who voiced the question for all of them: 'Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' (John 14.5.)

Thomas is the kind of critical friend we all need. His questioning teaches us the value of doubt, which is always the counterpart to faith. For it is Thomas who, in daring to question the truth of the resurrection as it was told to him by the others, is rewarded by a faith stronger than theirs. He says he will insist on sight and touch as a means of belief, and Christ offers him both. Yet when the offer comes, the mere sight of Christ's wounds is enough for him, and Thomas utters the words: 'My Lord and my God' – the very oath of allegiance which subjects of the Roman Empire were required to swear to the emperor. Thomas, instead, says them to the risen Christ, thereby placing his own life in danger. Two thousand years on, the words ask of us the question: where do we stand?

We notice how the wounds matter to Thomas. 'Unless I see the mark of the nails ... I will not believe.' Thomas, the realist, wants to see that the wounds are still visible on the risen Christ. The wounds matter to him, and to us, because the resurrection does not promise an escape from evil and suffering, but the assurance of a power that transforms them. God can take pain and heal and

redeem it. And that assurance is coupled with a pledge that, whatever our suffering and our pain, God is with us in it.

Pope Francis once said: 'I prefer a Church that is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out in the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security'. Those words, too, ask of us the question: where do we stand?

Fortunately, we do not stand alone. Even as Christ sends the disciples out, he breathes on them and says: 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' It is this which empowers that small frightened group of followers, hiding behind locked doors, to go out and change the world. And so Pentecost - the gift of the Holy Spirit - comes early in the Fourth Gospel. And it comes with a beautiful echo. The word used for 'breathe' is the same as the one used in the Book of Genesis when God breathes life into Adam. The resurrection takes place in a garden, where humanity's experience of paradise was lost. Now, the Gospel writer implies, the whole creation is being renewed, complete with a new breath of life from God. Telling of this is the writer's whole purpose: 'These [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and through believing you may have life in his name.'

So in these weeks of Easter, let us accept Christ's invitation to carry his peace out into the world, whatever the cost. And, in doing it, let us pray that we may have life, life in all its fullness, in his name.

Amen.