



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

*7th February 2021
Second Sunday before Lent*

Reflection

Jane Quarmby, Reader

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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