

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflections on the Cross

Good Friday - 15th April 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Address 1 – Crown of thorns

The context in which we gather this year needs no introduction. It is just over seven weeks since we woke to the news that Russia had invaded Ukraine, after days of denial that this was its intention. Grim sights not seen on this continent for more than seventy-five years have reminded an older generation, and taught a new one, of the suffering and the horror and the futility of war. When the suburb of Bucha was liberated a few weeks ago, a protestant pastor wearing army fatigues was interviewed as he walked through its streets, strewn with unburied bodies, contemplating the destruction of an entire community. He turned to the camera and said: 'How could this be happening in Europe in the twenty-first century?'

How indeed? How did we forget, allow the hard won peace of the last 75 years to slip through our fingers? When I drive past the entrance to the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery on the outskirts of Marseille, with its rows of gravestones commemorating those who died in two World Wars, the majority of them aged 19, 20, 21, sometimes as old as 35, it is as if a cry goes up echoing the words from the Book of Lamentations: 'Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?' We held within our grasp a peaceable post War order in Europe based on mutual cooperation, shared values and respect for human rights and freedoms, yet we watch as populist politicians across the continent speak the language of hatred, xenophobia and scapegoating as if the lessons of history had simply been forgotten. Treating 'the Other' as an 'it' and not a 'you', dismissing our common humanity.

'Is it nothing to you?', ask the people of Ukraine. As we gather here in safety to contemplate the Cross on which Jesus died, is there anything we could possibly have to say to them, huddled in basements, weeping beside roadside graves, crying out in pain?

One thing about contemplating the Cross is that it assures us God is with us in our places of deepest pain. Some of you may know the artist Matthias Grunewald's late medieval masterpiece now kept in the Unterlinden Museum at Colmar in Alsace. Known as the Isenheim Altarpiece, it originally stood in the Monastery of St Anthony at Isenheim, in a hospital ward where people came to be treated for a painful disease known as St Anthony's Fire. The disease was caused by contaminated rye grain and resulted in a wasting of the body and gangrene of the hands and feet. In its central *Crucifixion* panel, Jesus hangs on the Cross, which bends under the weight of his suffering, his body depicted as racked by the disease which the patients in the ward would have been battling. It's a powerful statement that we have to do with a God who knows our pain, who bears it with us, and who does so out of love for us, until the end of time.

As we watch at the foot of the Cross, we hear Jesus cry out in agony: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' We are offered the mystery of a God whose knowledge of the human condition is so deep that he has known even the sense of the absence of God.

If nothing else, that is the message we would want to assure those in agony, in Ukraine, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and all places where humans struggle under what feels an impossible load. We can't be there with them, but we can be here, praying for them, willing them on. And our faith is that God is with them too, every second of their agony, and will never let them go.

It is only natural to ask where a loving God is to be found in all this. The answer given by the writer Elie Wiesel, reflecting on his experiences as a prisoner in the concentration camp at Auschwitz, was this. He recalled how two Jewish men and a youth had been hanged in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour, because his body was lighter. Wiesel wrote:

'Where is God?' Where is he?' someone asked behind me. ... And I heard a voice in myself answer: 'Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows.'

Address 2 – Father, forgive

On Friday, 8th April the railway station at Kramadorsk, a town in the east of Ukraine, was filled with civilians following instructions they had been given to leave the city, because it was understood it would soon come under Russian attack. Without warning, rockets landed on the building causing multiple deaths

and injuries. When the smoke and the dust had cleared, amid the cries of the injured and bereaved, the remains of a rocket were found on which the words had been painted, apparently by a member of the Russian military: 'for our children'.

Those who know my preaching will know that I preach a lot about Auschwitz. The reason is that, seventy-seven years since its liberation, it still seems to me to represent some kind of benchmark for human depravity. A testament to the almost unthinkable depths to which humanity is capable of sinking. And yet it happened. And the litany of names where violence has been unleashed in the decades since Auschwitz goes on, and on, and on - Rwanda, Srebrenica, Darfur, Aleppo, Sa'dah, Boucha, Mariupol, Kramadorsk. So I make no apology for preaching about these places. Each generation can and must learn from the tragedies of the past, to avoid repeating them in the future. And one place where we confront all of it is the Cross. It is the place where, year after year, we are brought face to face with the cost of human depravity. Are there lessons we can learn here that will help us understand what goes on in our world and within ourselves? Our relationships, our responses to violence? Does this story still have power to change us?

The writing on the rocket found at Kramadorsk was a reminder of how the impact of war passes through generations, in a seemingly endless cycle of violence, retaliation and retribution. 'They did it to my family, so I will do it back to them.' How can that cycle of violence be broken?

The way Jesus broke it was with two words: 'Father, forgive.' He met betrayal, injustice and violence with love. On the night of 14th November 1940, the medieval cathedral of Coventry in England was bombed by Hitler's Luftwaffe. Shortly after the destruction, the cathedral stonemason, Jock Forbes, noticed that two of the charred roof timbers had fallen in the shape of a cross. He set them up in the ruins where they were later placed on an altar of rubble with the words 'Father Forgive' inscribed on the Sanctuary wall. They became symbolic with Coventry's renowned ministry of reconciliation in the decades that have passed since that night.

Forgiveness is central to the Gospel story. It features prominently in some of Jesus's best known sayings – the parable of the prodigal son, the story of the woman taken in adultery, the exhortation to forgive not just our friends but also our enemies as being the only way to redeem the past and think creatively about the future. And the words of the prayer that he taught his disciples include the request to forgive us our sins as we forgive others for theirs. Not to add poison to the system by harbouring resentments, but to break the cycle of violence.

That's what forgiveness does. Jesus's first words in his final hours remind us that at the heart of love, which is the heart of God, there is forgiveness, that this is the very nature of the God in whose likeness we are made, and that when we choose any other path we are distorting that likeness.

Some of you will have read the book or seen the film of *The Railway Man* by Eric Lomax, about an Englishman who was a prisoner of war in Japan during the Second World War. The book tells of how, many years later, he met the guard who had tortured him and they became friends. There is also the story of Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch Christian woman interned at Ravensbruck concentration camp because her family had been helping Jewish refugees, and who after the War was invited to take part in reconciliation work in Germany. Suddenly she came face to face with one of the camp guards who had caused her great suffering. He held out his hand to her, thanking her for the talk she had just given about reconciliation, unaware that they had met before in the camp. She wrote this:

'I tried to smile. I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so ... I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.'

We need to ask for forgiveness too. As we contemplate Christ's betrayal, suffering and death, we see more clearly the dangers that exist in the world around us and, if we are honest with ourselves, in our own hearts. It is only if we can see them clearly, as we do on Good Friday at the foot of the cross, that we are able to face them as Christ did and learn to do things differently.

Address 3 – It is finished

The 1980 film entitled *Elephant Man* tells the story of John Merrick, a man living in late 19th century London who suffered from a severe deformity and spent much of his life in a travelling circus, on display as a freak of nature known as 'the elephant man'. A feature of his condition was that he could not sleep lying down, as it would asphyxiate him. He was rescued from the circus by a doctor, Frederick Treves, played by Anthony Hopkins in the film. Treves discovers that John Merrick is intelligent, cultured and deeply lonely. Treves spends time with him, talking and watching Merrick build a model of a cathedral which he can see

from his hospital window. Despite Treves's care, Merrick continues to be mercilessly exploited by a variety of people, either wanting to make money out of his condition or indulging in a form of sadistic scapegoating. Each time he is rescued by Treves, until at the end of the film a much weakened Merrick returns to the hospital, close to death. He thanks Treves for all he has done and completes his model of the cathedral with the words: 'it is finished'. For the first time he lies down to go to sleep, and dies.

Those words indicate that the so-called Elephant Man is to be understood as a Christ-like figure, who dies because of the sinfulness of others. There is something unbearably sad about this gentle soul who consistently responds to the cruelty around him with grace and inner strength, all the while becoming weaker. 'It is finished' is not just about the model Merrick is building, but also about the ending of pain, the release from suffering, the resolution of hurt and the reconciliation of a life of sorrow interspersed with moments of joy. How does this connect with our contemplation of the Cross?

It has been said that 'The crucified Jesus is the only accurate picture of God the world has ever seen.' We see on the Cross a God who shares the dirt and the pain, the weakness and the loneliness, the very death that we experience ourselves. As the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned by the Nazi regime for taking part in the resistance against Hitler, and executed only weeks before the War ended, wrote from his prison cell: 'Only a suffering God can help.'

Yet the Greek meaning of Jesus's cry is not 'it is over' but 'it is accomplished'. It is a cry not of defeat but of victory. There is paradox here. The one who seemed powerless is actually revealed in strength. He chose to come to Jerusalem, he chose to accept the costly suffering. He has suffered with words of forgiveness on his lips. He has shown what it means to be fully human, and at the same time he has revealed the true nature of God.

For there is a cosmic dimension (if you prefer, a profound spiritual truth) being revealed here too. The contemporary theologian Sam Wells describes it by reference to an event that took place on 6th March 1987, when a cross-channel sea ferry carrying 500 people sank in the Belgian port of Zeebrugge, 90 seconds after leaving harbour, because its bow doors had not been closed before sailing. Later inquiries revealed culpability and complacency at almost every level of management within the ferry company - an avoidable human disaster costing 200 lives.

And yet assistant bank manager Andrew Parker, a passenger on the ferry that night, did an extraordinary thing. He saw two metal barriers, and, below, in the gap between them, he saw onrushing water. Behind him were dozens of people. So he held on to one barrier with his fists and the other with his ankles, and made his own body into a human bridge by stretching between the two barriers. Some 20 terrified people, including his own wife and daughter, climbed over him to safety. How he found the courage and strength, how he still was rescued after laying down his life for so many, no one could say. But there was no doubt that in that disaster the world could see both the depths of human failure and the heights of human aspiration. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13, KJV)

Wells writes of this story:

When you come into the presence of God, do you assume God is just like us – liable to terrible and merciless wrath, but also capable of amazing grace? That's not what the passion of Christ tells us. We're a mixture of good and bad, but God is good all the way down, all the time, all the way beyond forever and back. Holy Week is the story of what happens when our mixed-up lives come in touching distance of a goodness that goes beyond forever, and what happens to that goodness, and what happens to us.

The passion of Christ shows us that Jesus is stretched out between heaven and earth, between the limitless possibilities of human goodness and the fathomless horror of human depravity. Jesus' body is stretched out like Andrew Parker's body, between the barrier of human folly and the barrier of God's grace. Jesus' body is stretched out like a violin string between the two. And the name we give that agonising stretching-out is the cross. If we were all good, it wouldn't be so poignant. If we were all bad, it wouldn't be so painful. We're still God's creation, we're still God's beloved, so we're worth saving; but we're still cowardly, cruel and crooked, so the saving costs God everything. Jesus is the violin string stretched out between heaven and earth. And the music played on that string is what we call the gospel.'

We find a similar image in the reflections of Michael Mayne, the late Dean of Westminster, who suggests that in Jesus's costly, self-giving love revealed supremely on the Cross, he has rebuilt the bridge between God and humanity. The loving, forgiving, compassionate, affirming, foot-washing, self-sacrificing Christ reveals all we need to know of God in the only terms we can understand

– that of a human being, speaking our language, part of our world. Now he offers his life back to his Father. The work of redemption for humanity is complete. The way Jesus meets his death, with trust (Lord, into your hands I commend my spirit) and with forgiveness on his lips, is his final act of self-giving love, and that is the very glory of the being of God.

You could spend a lifetime contemplating that mystery. Fortunately, that is exactly how long we have.

Address 4 – Truly this man

One member of an occupying army, who saw the truth of what was happening in front of him. None of the Sanhedrin, none of the disciples, none of the passers-by who mocked and taunted as this man suffered the kind of death reserved for traitors and slaves.

One person. Think of the people you have seen or met who stood out alone, against injustice, against the mentality of the mob, who confronted evil with good, regardless of the cost to themselves. The image that often comes to mind when we think of that is of ‘tank man’, the unidentified Chinese man who on 5 June 1989 stood in front of a column of tanks from the People’s Liberation Army in Beijing, the day after the government had launched a crackdown against student protests that led to hundreds of deaths as they cleared protestors from Tiananmen Square.

Standing alone against injustice. The 2002 film known as *The Pianist* is based on the life of the Polish pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman, a survivor of the Holocaust. In the final stages of World War 2 amid the ruins of Warsaw, he encountered a German army officer, Wilm Hosenfeld, who showed him kindness, prompted by their shared love of music. Hosenfeld enabled him to continue in hiding and thereby to survive the War.

One member of an opposing army. Yet it can be enough to make the difference, enough to re-establish our common humanity. It is what Eric Lomax and Corrie ten Boom discovered and modelled in the aftermath of that same conflict. Please God may it be so one day also in Ukraine.

The army to which the centurion belonged continued to persecute the earliest followers of Christ. But some three hundred years later, the recognition shown by that one man on this day was adopted by Roman Emperor himself, who declared Christianity the official faith of the Empire. The rest, you could say, is history.

Our task, having shared the insight of the centurion, is to go out and live this Gospel. We need to be alert, always, to the evil in the world around us and in our own hearts, as we have seen. The desire to dominate, the behaviour that arises when people adopt an obsessive mindset of scarcity, concentrating on what they lack rather than what they have and might share, becoming intent on securing what the other has and dominating those around them. The practice of scapegoating, which we can see going on in society all around us, and which we catch in our own hearts when we think of someone as 'the Other', an 'it' and not a 'you'. All the things that were going on in first century Palestine. All the things that are going on now in Ukraine, and so many other places of conflict across our world.

And, having looked honestly at it all, what goes on around us and in our own hearts, we need then to fix our eyes on Jesus, his teaching, his way of living and his way of dying, his rising and the giving to each one of us of the gift of his Spirit. For ultimately, when this day is over, the question the Cross asks of us is: What are we going to do about it?

The Cross is (as my colleague John Smith remarked the other day) where our sinfulness meets God's love. And that is what defines our Christian faith. For against all the odds, all the horror, all the apparent failure, the message of Good Friday is this: love wins.

In Christ we find the assurance, which no human agency is able to offer so convincingly, that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8.39), and that, in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

Goodness is stronger than evil,
Love is stronger than hate,
Light is stronger than darkness,
Life is stronger than death,
Victory is ours through him who loved us.

Amen.