

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 7th Sunday of Easter (Sunday after Ascension Day) – 16th May 2021

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One of my favourite cantatas by Bach is *Vernügte Ruh'* (Contented rest, beloved pleasure of the soul) – It is the perfect music for these troubled times, I thought the other day, while knowing that, after being immersed in a landscape of peace and bliss, this cantata will transport me into a lament of pain and sorrow, that culminates with an impassioned rejection of the world:

The world, that house of sin,
Brings nought, but hellish lyrics forth,
And seeks, through hate and spite,
The devil's image e'er to cherish. [...]
Who should wish, indeed,
To live here,
When only hatred and hardship
Is the answer to love?
I'm sick and tired of living,
So take me, Jesus, [to the heavenly Zion].

The longed-for flight to Jesus' dwelling is not to happen as and when the disciples wish. You have just heard Jesus say, 'As you [my Father] have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world'. And yet, he has acknowledged 'they do not belong to the world, just as [he does] not belong to the world'.

Let us put today's Gospel reading into context. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus gave the disciples the new commandment of love, prepared them for his departure, and warned them of the world's hatred. He then then prayed for them, for their unity and protection in a world that will reject them. Through his words, Jesus drew the disciples into his relationship with God the Father.

This is somewhat of a paradox: the disciples are sent into a world to which they do not belong and that will prove hostile. Jesus wants to convey something urgent about the

world in his prayer: we have heard the word – cosmos in the Greek original – no less than thirteen times.

So what is this world? It cannot be the universe, as we know it, part of God's generous Creation. Is it human society organised as it sees best to promote its own purposes? Culture? The human ordering of things that causes suffering and oppression and cruelty and greed? Yet this is the world that God loves: 'For God so loved the world ...'

If the world is so 'difficult' an entity, why does it exist, after all? And how does it exist? God is infinite, how is there (and why should there be) room for anything else? In the 16th century, Rabbi Isaac ben Solomon Luria had a radical answer, a doctrine known as 'tzimtzum', which means contraction, self-effacement, withdrawal. God, Luria said, contracted into himself to leave a space for the world. The Hebrew word for universe is 'olam' and comes from a root that also means hiding, concealment. The creation of the world (the cosmos) and of humankind is an act of self-effacement, an act of love. But God could not leave the world devoid of his presence. 'For 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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.' (John 3.16-17)

The disciples are caught in the tension between "out of the world" and "in the world". This is a difficult place to be. St Paul told us, 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.' (Romans 12.2). Yet, the world, as he knew it, has not improved and we are even more entrapped in it than Jesus' disciples were.

Indeed, the 21st century confronts humanity with challenges of a scale and scope that seem to defy solution. The problems are vast, interconnected and global, they lie beyond the reach of even the most powerful states. Living in the here and now, how can we reconcile an honest assessment of the world around us with our faith?

The greatest danger facing Western societies today is the sense of powerlessness, of problems too great to solve and hatred too deep to cure. This is all too easily manipulated by those hungry for power. Fear can be a vehicle to harness anger, violence, xenophobia, or end in capitulation and defeatism. In the words of the poet W. B. Yeats:
"The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity." (*The Second Coming*)

How then can we make a difference? We are no more than a grain of sand on the seashore. We want to help, but there is all too little any of us can do.

Under such pressure, one can attempt to create a 'safe' space, to seek salvation within a closed community or within the self.

The question of the relationship between Christianity and the world has been an enduring one. Christian perplexity in this area has been perennial. Should Christians not withdraw from the sinful world to maintain their holiness? Over nearly 2000 years, thousands of groups and individuals have felt compelled to do it. One can all too easily be tempted to pass judgement on them, as being inwardly turned and selfishly preoccupied with their own saintliness, while condemning the world.

I have a special fondness for St Simeon Stylites, who lived atop a pillar, exposed to the elements, for 37 years. He had wanted to escape the popular veneration that his reputed miracle-working brought upon him. However, visitors continued to be drawn to him, to seek spiritual counsel, cure from sickness, justice for the oppressed. His seeming contempt for present existence was paired with great concern for humankind.



Jacques de Besancon : *Legenda aurea* by Jacobus de Voragine c. 1480-1490
Bibliothèque nationale de France

There is an image of the Ascension I want to share with you, and it was one that was rather widespread in the 15th and 16th century. Jesus's feet are about to disappear and the disciples are looking up towards heaven. At the centre of the picture, on the top of a mound, one can see Christ's footprints. This motif might have appeared in art when pilgrimages to the Church of the Ascension, on the Mount of Olives, were no longer possible. This church had been built in the 4th century around a slab of stone believed to be imprinted with Jesus's right foot, as he ascended into heaven.

The footprints in the illumination are symbolic of the reality of Jesus's life on earth, of his Resurrection, and of his Ascension. And of the world being stamped as the locus of God's saving love.

In his Ascension, Christ invited his disciples to enter into a new relationship with him that will no longer depend on his physical presence but will rely on trusting in his love and growing into the people and the community that he has called them to become in the world. It is time for them to continue his transforming work in the world. We are to live in this world embracing eternal life with our feet firmly planted on this earth.

The words of St Teresa of Avila are very often quoted – and rightly so: "Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out on a hurting world, yours are the feet with which he goes about doing good; yours are the hands with which he is to bless now."

We will not be saved from the world, we are not meant to withdraw or sit in judgment. We are sent to walk in Jesus's steps and to be his 'imprint' on the world, to make visible his presence and action. We are sent into the world to witness to the gift of eternal life, a life in which we recognise God's work and where we embody his love made known to us in the Word made flesh. Indeed, God's world and God's Eternity cannot be separated, as the Hebrew word *olam* shows it: it means both universe and eternity.

In the Eastern Churches, when the Divine Liturgy is about to begin, the deacon exclaims to the priest: 'It is time for the Lord to act.' The Liturgy is only one of the crucial moments when our lives intersect with Eternity. We are sent into the world to witness to the glimpses of Eternity and let them nourish our lives. Like the apostle Matthias, we can live an unspectacular life of discipleship, that won't make headlines, and still make a difference. Our task is to heal this fractured world.

Amen.