

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 3rd Sunday of Easter – 18th April 2021

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Changing Hearts and Minds

At our service in the Luberon on Easter day the reading from John's gospel left us with as many questions as answers. For example, we were told that John "saw and believed" (but not what he believed) followed by "for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." We wondered how was it possible to walk with the living fulfilment of the scriptures for three years and yet not understand the scriptures? And why had the disciples not understood when Jesus told them at least two or three times that he would rise from the dead on the third day? Even the chief priests and the Pharisees knew that Jesus had said this. So, I am grateful that our gospel reading today gives us an opportunity to revisit this statement as, in this post-resurrection scene, we have the verse "then Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures".

Just prior to opening their minds Jesus said "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses must be fulfilled." So, it is back to Moses that we will go to start the journey of learning how God chooses to reveal Himself to us and gives us understanding of scripture. Through Moses God renewed His covenant with His chosen people to prepare them for living in the promised land that they were about to enter. Moses said, "you have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, the signs, and those great wonders but to this day the Lord has not given you a heart (some translations say mind) to understand". This is a scene that has just been replayed with Jesus showing his disbelieving disciples his hands and his feet. "Touch me" he says "I am not a ghost" but they still did not understand.

It is these two translations of the Hebrew word [לֵב](#) *lêb* which means 'heart' but is translated as 'mind' in some versions of the Bible that has caught my attention because I believe 'heart' and 'mind' are not the same and the difference may be key to our understanding of scripture. In his renewing of God's covenant with the Israelites, Moses refers to the heart six times. Each time its use is significant.

To summarize, 'the amazing work of God in circumcising (changing) the heart is predicated upon Israel's turning its own heart and returning to God with the whole heart and soul'.

So how are we to understand 'heart' here? We are all used to the idiomatic use of heart to express a wide range of meanings and feelings. Have a heart (sympathy), take heart (courage), in a heartbeat (immediately), heart of gold/stone (kind/cold), heart in the right place (well intentioned) and wear your heart on your sleeve (be open) are just a few examples but what about the use of 'heart' in the Bible? Firstly, references to the heart as the physical organ are few and by no means specific. The Hebrews thought in terms of subjective experience rather than objective, scientific observation. It was essentially the whole person, with all their attributes, physical, intellectual and psychological, which the Hebrew thought and spoke of, and the heart was conceived of as the governing centre for all of these. It is the heart that makes us what we are and governs all our actions. Character, personality, will and mind are modern terms which reflect something but not all of the meaning of 'heart' in its biblical usage. There is no suggestion in the Bible that the brain is the centre of consciousness, thought or will. It is the heart that is so regarded.

When we are told that we should love the Lord our God with all our hearts, we should understand that we should love God with every part of our being not just our minds – with all our soul, with all our strength and yes with all our minds. But our hearts do not always do this. Our hearts are not what they should be. A change of heart is required. The right attitude of heart begins with it being broken or crushed, symbolic of humility and penitence. Repentance and conversion are required. That is why the Psalmist prays that God will search and know the heart and make it clean. And why Jesus says "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God". It is through Christ's dwelling in our hearts by faith that we can comprehend the love of God and begin to understand the true meaning of scripture.

How many times have you heard the mind being an obstacle to faith? How many times have you heard people say 'if I could only understand scripture then I would believe?' Nicodemus is a classic example of somebody who had all the learning possible and the deepest knowledge of the law but he did not understand when Jesus said he must be born again (have a change of heart). It was St Augustine who said "I believe so that I may understand". Saint Anselm of Canterbury expanded on this when he said "I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but rather, I believe in order that I may understand"

From this I conclude that we need a change of heart before we can have a change of mind. A change of heart that comes only by God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit. This is important to understand for it has implications for our own response to God's call on our lives and it has very important implications for how we witness to others. For ourselves it is good to have a 'heart check' periodically to see if we are still faithful in all ways possible. But then we should consider how we fulfil Christ's command at the end of today's gospel, to 'proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations'. We have to win hearts and minds but it is in that order. The change of heart can only happen with the intervention of the Holy Spirit but once that is achieved, the second, the mind change, will follow.

Some people think the greatest help to evangelism today would be to see more miraculous events. After all, who could not believe in the face of such displays of spiritual power? But as the examples of the Israelites and the disciples of Jesus have just illustrated, the greatest wonders imaginable would not have made a difference unless God sent His Spirit to change their hearts.

So how is the ground prepared and the seed of the gospel sown so that it will bear fruit some a hundredfold, some sixtyfold and some thirtyfold as the parable of the sower teaches us? It is the Holy Spirit's work to prepare the ground to receive the seed and we have to accept that there is some compacted ground, some rocky ground that will not be receptive to God's word; the stony hearts that will not change but we do have a significant role to play in the selection of the seed that we sow and how, when, where and to whom it is sowed. And by the way before we proceed, if God's word is not working in your life, you had better check the ground the seed is falling on.

Christians long for a self-sustaining, self-replicating movement of the Holy Spirit that will change the world as it repeatedly presents kingdom beliefs and behaviours, multiplying its effect like a virus to use a bad analogy. Were Jesus here on earth today, I wonder if He would say 'the kingdom of God is like a YouTube video or Internet message that has gone 'viral', passed on one person at a time, rejected by some but where it takes root it multiplies quickly, replicating thirty, sixty or even a hundred times?' The disruptive kingdom the world needs requires disruptive models of 'being' church but we cannot afford to wait for the church to change.

Whilst others talk about planting churches, we individual Christians need to get busy planting gospel seeds. The gospel stories are the seed of viral replication if

you will. Scripture provides the perfect source that can be 'discovered' by all and become a tangible reality when reinforced by kingdom actions on our part. Our walk has to follow our talk. As Chresten Tomlin, an American evangelist said, 'we are called to be like God but we have settled for just being nice'. He went on to say that 'we should remember who we are for we are more than what we have become'. As we grow and strive to become more like God, it is not enough for us to just grasp our own salvation without fulfilling our purpose from the beginning of time: to work for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We must take up this challenge and join the kingdom movement to seed the gospel afresh to be actively working with the Holy Spirit changing hearts and minds for Christ.

It was Easter evening when we remembered Cleopas and his friend as they walked from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were joined by a stranger and their hearts were ablaze, burning within them as the stranger, the unrecognised Jesus, opened the scriptures to them. I pray that it be so with us as we answer God's calling on our lives.

Alleluia. Amen