

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Second Sunday of Easter – 24th April 2022

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Perhaps it's a strange question to start with, but why do you believe in Jesus? Millions don't – and it's scarcely fashionable in either England or France. What keeps drawing you back to Sunday services or Complines? Why do you believe? Why do you pray? The answers can only be found by questioning our deepest selves. Jesus knows us for who we are, just as he knew his disciples. He was aware that the one forever stuck with the name Doubting Thomas had refused to believe in the Resurrection. Thomas wasn't there the first time Jesus appeared to the others, so he's very sceptical: *'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'*

I don't know about you, but I sympathise with him. We have the advantage of the New Testament and thousands of years of Christian witness, but before the Gospels were even dreamed of, would you have taken their word *as gospel* – or gossip? Jesus doesn't condemn Thomas for having doubts. He tells him to do exactly what he'd wanted: *'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.'* He gently invites this person with the questioning mind to test his faith. Understanding his needs, Jesus calls him to trust: *'Do not doubt but believe.'*

Now re-visit the scene and notice that Thomas doesn't take up Jesus' invitation. Instead, he's quite overcome. No need for further proof! He exclaims: *'My Lord and my God!'*. *'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe'*, replies Jesus. And yes, we are truly blessed. Through the Holy Spirit, we know Jesus' living presence in our lives. For believers, this is a far deeper reality than that of the material world in which we now live. The question that raises is what difference does it make? The final verses of chapter 20 were probably its conclusion: *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe*

*that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that **through believing you may have life in his name.*** How might having *life in his name* differ from simply being alive?

Today's gospel began: *When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews....* These were frightened people, their minds disturbed by Jesus' death, in fear for their own lives. But Jesus brings a great gift: *'Peace be with you'.* *After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.* He repeats: *'Peace be with you',* and says, *'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'* As he gives his peace, he brings joy and hope, and with that comes a commission: to share that peace with the world.

One day, as I talked with a friend about injustice, he said to me: *'But it's impossible to deny that humankind has come on in leaps and bounds'.* In one sense he was right – progress in science has been incredible. Discoveries have had life-changing impacts on millions worldwide. In many societies we see better care for those who struggle in life. Some cultures show more tolerance towards those who are different. Yes, the general report card in many societies would read: *Progress has been made.* But might it not add *Could do better?*

How have you reacted to the scenes coming out of Ukraine? I know my initial response has been deep shock and anger. Feeling righteous anger against the evil being done there is just. But however reluctantly, when I see the lives of innocent people smashed to pieces, I also recognise deep within me a visceral desire for retaliation – a wish to hurt and destroy in return. *We civilised people* haven't lost the capacity or desire to hurt and harm. The weapons we possess now have the power to obliterate this world. Have we made so much progress in the area that really matters: how we relate to God and our fellow men and women?

Three times in today's gospel Jesus repeats the words *'Peace be with you'.* Despite all the advances made, we still have a long way to go to establish that *peace on earth as it is in heaven.* Misuse of Earth's resources is an urgent issue we can't afford to ignore. We spend billions on the production of ever more deadly weapons. Living under the protection of military alliances, we fail to invest in life. Is this really the deep peace that Christ wishes for us? We may personally be cushioned from reality by living relatively comfortable lives, but ours is a fallen world where violence, war and exploitation mar so many lives.

So what are we being called to do as Christians in this unjust world? Peter and the apostles show us the way in today's Acts reading: *We must obey God rather than any human authority* they say. What they were doing was undoubtedly really dangerous. The priests had already given them *strict orders not to teach in this name*. But their time with Jesus, the post-Resurrection encounters and then the coming of the Holy Spirit have filled them with a passion to share the risen life of Christ. Hiding away in a house where the doors were *locked for fear of the Jews*, those previously fearful disciples have now received his peace and are filled with the sure hope of the Resurrection. Jesus has been revealed in his true nature: as The Book of Revelation says: *the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth*. Jesus, the Christ, is with and in God: *the Alpha and the Omega' who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty*.

Sometimes, when I read accounts of the early Church I wonder where so much of that fizzing dynamism has gone, and perhaps even more importantly, that fundamental hope and trust that God, rather than our own efforts, will see us through. They had their difficulties: St Paul's letters show us that! But they were fired up by the message of the Resurrection and filled with the Holy Spirit - unencumbered as yet by churches with leaking roofs and collapsing floors. Don't get me wrong – I've sung in cathedral choirs and been transported by services that give due glory to God. And yet Surely our faith should be spilling out way beyond the walls of our churches.

Today, as we read the psalm we said: *I shall not die, but live and declare the works of the Lord*. God has been calling his people throughout the ages not only to acknowledge him personally as creator and Lord, but to pass on that peace. Peter and the apostles lived and breathed the resurrection life; they were truly alive as they shared the Good News. *Through believing they had life in his name*. Our encounters with the risen Christ: in prayer, in everyday life, in his presence in other people, should be equally transformative as it was for Thomas when he exclaimed: *My Lord and my God!* Jesus tells the disciples: *As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*' We're his lights in the world today. In what we do and say, let them shine way beyond the boundaries of church walls.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.