

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Sunday, 27th December 2020

The Revd John Smith

It is so good to be able to worship with you today. I have often wondered why it is in the Anglican church when Jesus shows up the priests disappear. It happens in the time after Christ's arrival at Christmas and after Christ's resurrection at Easter. In fact, this year I received an email from the bishop of my home diocese telling me and all the priests in the diocese to take this Sunday off. I am glad to say this is not the case in the Marseille chaplaincy. And I would like to say how blessed I feel to minister with colleagues who ensure that the gospel is preached every Sunday in this chaplaincy. We are so blessed with the leadership Jamie has brought to our worship together and with not one but two wonderful lay readers Christine and Jane who always, always have thoughtful encouragement and challenge to give us. And now added blessings with Roxana curating with us. David, Patrick and I sort of fill in the small holes left.

I am sorry for those churches that do not have services today and are missing this wonderful reading from Luke, for it includes one of my very favourite passages - the song of Simeon, otherwise known as the Nunc Dimittis. The Nunc Dimittis means a lot to me. As a teenager, I used to go to my parents' non-denominational Sunday School in the morning, to my father's services in Methodist chapels on the North Yorkshire circuit in the afternoon and I got to sing in the church of England choir only for the service of evensong.

Hearing the words of the Nunc Dimittis we are left with a real sense of completion. Simeon, to whom it had been revealed that he would see the Messiah before he died, not only got to see the Messiah but to cradle the salvation of the world in his arms. Imagine that. How powerfully the Holy Spirit, which had led Simeon into the temple at this time, must have rested on Simeon. It must have been the Holy Spirit that gave Simeon the visionary words when holding the babe in his arms, "a light for the revelation to the Gentiles". The salvation of Jesus began with Israel but it was always God's intention to extend his salvation beyond Israel to the rest of the world.

The other thing I love about this passage is this walk on part for the remarkable woman Anna. As a widow, Anna knew pain and loss but she had not become bitter. As an elderly woman she had not lost hope but served God day and night with fasting and prayer. Anna was probably the first evangelist speaking about the Messiah to all who were seeking. It is interesting to me given the church's history, how God chose a woman to be his first witness to him as Messiah and chose women to be his first witnesses to his resurrection.

If you don't mind, I am going to set this wonderful passage aside to raise an issue that has been on my heart for the last few weeks. It may not help that I am coming to the end of my year-long, bible reading plan. With the Old Testament ending in the minor prophets and the New Testament ending in Revelation I am in an apocalyptic frame of mind.

The issue that is bothering me is something that Jamie mentioned a couple or more weeks ago. He said that he knew or had heard of a previously believing couple who had decided that they could no longer believe in God because of the pandemic. They could not comprehend how a loving God could allow such death and devastation on a global scale as has happened in 2020.

Let me say at the outset that I do not believe that the pandemic is God's punishment for our sinfulness though it could be and I believe it would be justified if it were. My first reaction was why should the world expect God's mercy when the vast majority of the world and especially the developed world, has turned its back on God and is doing so increasingly? Idolatry, materialism, greed, lust, avarice, immorality etc. etc. thrive whilst we turn our back on God and progressively trust in our own self-sufficiency. Rather than turning away from God we should be coming to God to confess our ingratitude and wickedness and to plead for his forgiveness and cleansing.

Why God allows suffering in the world is one of the big questions that we Christians wrestle with. For me it is on a par with why does God allow Satan and man to rebel and go our own way? We do our best to understand these questions but, for me, they are mysteries that have not been revealed to us. In Biblical vocabulary, a mystery isn't something no one knows. A mystery is something no one could know unless it was revealed to them. If you could know it by intuition or personal investigation, it isn't a mystery, because mysteries must be revealed. As an example, something like the pandemic can be known but its cause and purpose in God's terms can still be a mystery in the Biblical sense.

It is surprising how many things that we take for granted are called mysteries in the Bible. God's purpose for the church is called a mystery (Ephesians 3:3-11), the bringing in of the fullness of the Gentiles that Simeon saw is called a mystery (Romans 11:25), the very living presence of Jesus in the believer is called the mystery of God and the gospel itself is called the mystery of Christ (Colossians 1:27-2:3). Life today is full of mysteries; but it will not always be so. A day will come when all questions of this age will be answered. What we can be sure of is that all unanswered mysteries are coming to an end under the rule of Jesus. God is beginning the end, the resolution of all things, the gathering together (resolution, summing up) of all things in Jesus.

Habakkuk, one of the prophets I read last week, saw the loss of all agricultural produce equivalent to massive and total economic ruin in Judah. He also foresaw the impending deportation of the people of Judah to Babylon. But in the midst of desperate circumstances, rather than turning away from God, Habakkuk finds joy and strength in God. He is mature enough in his faith to allow adversity to strengthen his trust and dependence on Yahweh. To quote George Adam Smith, a Scottish theologian, "Not in spite of misfortune, but because of it, should we exult in 'the god of our salvation'". When Habakkuk's worst fears become a reality, he himself becomes an illustration of living faith.

I have allowed myself a quiet smile when I have seen the churches getting ready to reopen this year. All the precautions we have put in place and how carefully we have sanitised everything. I was wondering if Jesus came through the door whether he would say "Woe to you, Anglicans, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside you are full of greed and self-indulgence. First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean". Or maybe "Woe to you, Anglicans, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside you are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So, you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of lawlessness".

Is the sterility that we have sought to achieve in our physical facilities a metaphor for the sterility that we have in our worship and personal discipleship? Have we sought to fight the virus that is in the air whilst ignoring the virus within us individually and collectively? Is our interminable washing and sanitising of our hands to be compared with Pontius Pilate?

Coming into a new year and a new world in many respects, we have the opportunity to rethink how we act as church and how we live out our faith. The pandemic like nothing else has highlighted and in some ways accentuated the plight of the poor and the marginalised. John Wesley insisted that “the gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness”. Christ calls the church to be a social alternative to a pagan society. For the Christian, life is a process of seeking justice, mercy and peace whilst serving the destitute and the needy, the prisoner and the refugee, the homeless and the orphan, the hungry, the broken and the loveless. Whatever our church and personal lives are reshaped to be in the coming months and years, let these people together with Jesus Christ, always be our focus.