

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Second Sunday of Lent – 28th February 2021

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This morning's Gospel presents us with some very stern sayings of Jesus. Here are just two. ***Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.*** Then to Peter, ***Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.***

So here we are today, the Second Sunday of Lent. How are we getting on with the Church's principal penitential season? Our chaplaincy Lenten activities, with its personal testimonies and weekly study sessions are no doubt a great help and encouragement to some of us. Comments over this past week show how many valued John's taking us through the wilderness last Sunday.

Lent can be a very barren place at times, especially when it comes to the things we have tried to give up as part of our seasonal fasting. I once asked a rather cynical clerical friend what he had given up for Lent. He said he had failed every year in his denials, so much so, that he had decided to "Give up Lent" and try to do something 'more positive'.

One year, as a young ordinand, about this time in Lent I was with my Spiritual Director, Fr. Ralph Martin SSM. He naturally wanted to know how my Lent was progressing. I had to be honest and admit that I felt it was becoming a total failure. I was way behind in my Lent Book. Worse still, I couldn't cope with my abstinences. Tea without sugar was a nightmare! Such small pleasures can so easily start to seem necessities. He suggested two things: Lent needs to have a firm foundation and consistency, and should always have its eye on Easter.

He suggested that the collect for Ash Wednesday one such firm foundation: ***Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing that you have made and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent: create and make in us new and contrite hearts.....***

For consistency, as was suggested by Cranmer in the Book of Common Prayer, he advised me to use it in my daily prayer for Lent. Sadly, Common Worship relegates it to Post Communion use but if you would like to use it yourselves, I've attached the full text at the end of this reflection.

Jesus's words in this morning's gospel also encourage us to have our eyes on Easter. We cannot know with any certainty that Jesus knew precisely what was going to happen to him. The gospels often read as they are: written in the hindsight of the actual events. But Mark repeats three times in identical words Jesus's predictions of his fate. Matthew and Luke also record triple predictions in one form or another and this would seem to testify that Jesus clearly warned his disciples that he would ***undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed.*** Yet this would not be the end: God would bring him gloriously and victoriously through all these challenges, even his death: ***After three days, he will rise again.***

In these words Jesus looks forward to a transformed world, not just for himself, but for the whole of humanity. Through his life, death and resurrection, he will bring a new world to the human race, a new humanity, transformed and elevated by the resurrection grace of God. This will be a world in which he promises both cross and resurrection. There can be no resurrection without the cross, no Easter without Lent.

Although he would give up his own life in the end, the idea of Jesus's suffering and death is one that Peter is unable to take on board at this point. We're not told the words that Peter uses, only that ***Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.*** The original Greek here carries a strong sense of rejection. It's the same word used when Jesus confronts evil spirits, the winds and unruly disciples. Peter's ***rebuke*** shows an utter rejection of what Jesus knows will happen, hence his response, ***Get behind me Satan!*** This may seem unduly harsh, but, as the next words show, he is not demonising Peter. Rather the point is that Peter is opposing what Jesus knows has to happen: he is ***setting (his) mind not on divine things but on human things.*** Like many other translations, the original Revised Standard Version makes this very clear: ***Get behind me Satan because you are not on the side of God, but of men.***

What Jesus is saying here is that we can choose to live at one of two levels. There is the basic human, almost animal level, where we only think and live out our lives for ourselves and our own self-interested ways of thinking. This was how Peter saw things. He could not accept such terrible things would happen to his

hero. But this was the pre-Resurrection Peter, the frightened Peter who would go on to deny Jesus three times before the cock crowed - not the man who would go on to be a powerful witness to his Lord - and give his own life for his faith.

We now live through our faith in the life death and resurrection of Jesus. By his continuing presence with us through the Holy Spirit, we can live a very different life of hope, enhanced and governed by love, joy, peace and all the fruits of the Spirit. In faith we can live a life in the image of God as declared in the opening chapter of the Bible. (Genesis 1.16 ***Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.'***)

This will not always be an easy life, as Jesus shows in the rest of our gospel reading today. It will entail denial, sacrifice and loss. And it is a life that only comes through faith as seen in the faith of Abraham in both today's First and Second Readings. God calls the great Patriarch into a new covenant relation where, as a sign, he will no longer be called Abram (high father - of one family) but Abraham (the father of many - nations). Sarai (mockery) also receives a new name: Sarah (princess). Through this, Paul, in our New Testament Reading declares Abraham the father of all faithful people. But for Paul, in the new covenant, this is now faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ.

We might think of Lent as a positive opportunity to renew our baptised faith, so that when we come to Easter we can truly rise to a new life. Just as a car needs a regular service, or in French a ***revision***, so for us, Lent is the time to give our lives a "service", and even perhaps an MOT, or in French a ***contrôle technique!*** Lent offers us the opportunity to check out where we are in our lives, in our personal values, our relationships with others, both close and far, and with the wider world and the natural environment. Above all, a time to consider our life with God.

The Introduction to our Ash Wednesday Eucharist invites us to a holy Lent ***by self-examination and repentance***. As we hear the Christian testimony of others in our chaplaincy before Compline on Wednesday evenings, we can perhaps reflect on and reassess our own faith. In the study group sessions we're thinking about Rowan Williams's reflections on life in the pandemic. We might consider what this strange time has meant for our own faith, and especially our worship.

We are also called to ***a time of prayer***. How about a daily use of the Collect for Ash Wednesday below? And what of the call to ***fasting and self denial?*** So often

we only give things up with a selfish motive. Perhaps our denial should be for the benefit of others and the precious world in which we live. In the call to ***reading and meditating on God's holy word***, perhaps we might daily reflect for ourselves on the readings of the previous Sunday. We can all have ideas other than those presented by our clergy team each week!!

However we continue with our Lenten observance, may we keep our eyes on Easter when, through the fruits of a rich Lent, we can rise to a new life - a renewing of our baptismal vows as a sign of our resurrection.

***Almighty and everlasting God,
you hate nothing that you have made
and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent:
create and make in us new and contrite hearts
that we, worthily lamenting our sins
and acknowledging our wretchedness,
may receive from you, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and forgiveness;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen***