

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Reflection – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020**

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Today's Old Testament reading - was too good to miss! Not only is it a story most of us will have known since childhood, it's also particularly apt in the current circumstances. Tomorrow marks 49 days since we began '*le confinement*' and some people have found these last weeks difficult to bear. But imagine a year cooped up in a confined space with the whole family and hundreds of animals! And remember, Noah didn't open the window to let out the raven until 40 days had passed.

But joking apart, this story must be known by millions of us, even those who have very little to do with church. How many of us drew pictures of the ark on the waters at Sunday School, complete with a rainbow and a dove? It's an ancient tale, appearing in many forms in both Mesopotamia and the wider world. There are many inconsistencies in the Genesis account - for example did Noah take in seven pairs of clean animals, or just one, "two by two"? Scholars believe this shows that the writer took two versions that he knew and spliced them together. It doesn't spoil the story, but the way the text differs from its sources should interest us.

Instead of many warring gods, wreaking violence upon the world, now there is ONE God who from the very start has a moral purpose to his actions. So dissatisfied with his human creation, he decides to destroy it but from the outset he intends to rebuild. Pairs of every imaginable creature are to be saved in the ark - both *clean* and *unclean*. God makes no distinction. But there is to be a better future for humankind. The sole person God finds *righteous before me in this generation* will begin a renewed world. Once the waters have dried up, God tells Noah "*I have set my bow in the clouds ... This is the sign of the covenant*

*that I have established between me and all the flesh that is on the earth.”* The covenant re-establishes a world where God and humanity are in a right relationship.

During this confinement, all over the world children have been drawing rainbows and displaying them to the outside world from their windows. The rainbow which spoke of the covenant between God and his people lives on as a lasting symbol of hope. Even in what some writers depressingly try to label “the post-Christian age”, people still talk of a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. But Christian hope is far greater than a wish for ‘somewhere over the rainbow’. It’s a *certainty* that whoever chooses Jesus Christ as the gateway to life ‘*will be saved*’. In today’s gospel he tells us: “*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly*”. Through him a final covenant will be established for all people and for all time.

The Good Shepherd appears at the top of your service sheet. As in the well-loved psalm, he seems comforting and full of reassurance. In today’s gospel we see Jesus comparing himself to a good shepherd who safely leads his sheep as they go out from the fold into the dangers of the wider world. In many ways it’s easier to understand the idea of a good shepherd than the image Jesus uses here: “*Very truly, I tell you, **I am the gate for the sheep.** All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. **I am the gate**”.*

This is only one of many *I am* statements we find in John’s gospel: *the bread of life, the light of the world, the true vine* - statements that outraged most of his contemporaries and continue to outrage many non-Christians today. In John 8:58, Jesus astounds the Pharisees: “*Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was born, **I am!***” They react immediately: *At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.* They’re revolted by what they see as blasphemy. These are the words of God to Moses from the burning bush: *I am who I am* - a name so holy that it would not be spoken aloud by a Jew. Whenever Jesus uses these words he is clearly identifying himself with the Godhead.

In his book 'Water into Wine', Bishop Stephen Verney discusses Jesus' seemingly-strange comparison of himself to a gate: "*A door has two sides, an inside and an outside. In the figure of speech Jesus has used, one side of the door is the door of the courtyard of the sheepfold, and the other side is the open country. In our own houses, one side of the front door is home and the other side is the street. The truth of I AM is also a door with two sides - one side is a man on earth and the other side is God in heaven, and through that door of I AM the love of the human race goes up to God, and the love of God comes down on the human race*".

To pass through that door, follow the Good Shepherd, have life *abundantly*, we need first to recognise the door. In today's passage from Acts, the lives of the early Christians seem simpler than ours, but surely they faced the same everyday pressures of earning a living and raising families? Yes, life in first century Palestine was in some ways less complex, but this doesn't mean that there's nothing we can learn from the early Church. We might consider why so many were drawn *day by day* to join them. *Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.* Worshipping together, particularly in the Eucharist, Christ was at the centre of their lives. They recognised Jesus as the gate. They heard his voice. People were attracted by their *abundant* life.

During the last few weeks we have been so fortunate in being able to continue worshipping and praying together. In some ways our three distant congregations have even grown closer. And perhaps we've begun, like so many people, to reflect on the changes this epidemic has brought about. Listening to the BBC, I've been struck by the discoveries being made: people noticing clear, trail-free skies, city dwellers able to hear birdsong, showing their children the stars in the night skies for the first time, perhaps marvelling at how very small we are in our universe. And interestingly, another finding: far more British people are tuning into online services and prayer meetings than were seen in church in recent years. The hectic rhythm of what we've come to believe is "normal" has been broken. This unprecedented situation is causing many people to pause and think.

Coronavirus is no respecter of international borders. Rich nations no longer have the option of ignoring the plight of the poor - hit twice as hard by the virus as more affluent communities both at home or abroad. The whole world is in this crisis together. On Thursday night's evening news, US commentator Naomi Klein was discussing the possible outcomes from the pandemic. She referred to this moment as a *portal* - in other words a gateway or door. We are now facing, she said, a turning point where human society can make some life-changing decisions. The choices are stark. We can continue with more of the same: we could opt for ceaseless development, an ever-widening gap between rich and poor, increasing injustice and further destruction of the fragile habitat we share with other creatures. But we might learn lessons and make different choices.

As we emerge from our individual arks of isolation, will we, like Noah, see a rainbow? As we approach the coming portal of change, who will be our gate? Who will we choose to guide us out of the sheepfold? We may not be able to return to the simplicity of life of those first Christians, but we are intelligent creatures, able to reflect and learn. And we are spiritual creatures. Today's Collect urges us *to seek those things which are above*. We pray for the wisdom to see the gate and to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd calling us on.

Amen.