

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon – Good Friday**

**2<sup>nd</sup> April 2021**

**All Saints' Marseille**

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After those words ('This is the Passion of the Lord') the prayer book adds: 'No response is made'. So it may seem ironic that, at the place where language falls silent, the next word written in the prayer book is: 'Sermon'. How can anyone put into words what has just happened? A parish priest once lamented to me the fact that his church offered tea and hot cross buns after the service on Good Friday. All he wanted was to go away and be alone, in silence.

What is it about this story that silences us? And what is it about this story that is so compelling? It is sometimes said of the Titanic disaster that one reason why its story is so often retold is that people in each generation wonder what they would have done if they had been there on that night. I suspect that is one reason why the Passion narrative is still so compelling, two thousand years on. So much of human behaviour is laid bare. The best and the worst. Mary comforts, Judas betrays, Peter affirms then denies, Joseph seeks, Nicodemus follows in secret, Thomas doubts, Caiaphas abuses power, so does Herod, so does Pilate. The disciples run away in fear. Jesus is left alone. All those involved in his death had choices. Yet people talk of the domino effect of human

wrongdoing. If you line up dominoes in a particular way and push one, the others all fall. The same is true of human sinfulness. We have seen it many times, for it is often the way human conflict starts. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo in 1914. The shooting down of a plane carrying Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana in 1994. Dominoes falling in a deadly acceleration of violence, apparently unstoppable.

The last days of Jesus, which we have been following in our services each day this week, are of universal significance. As the spiritual writer Erik Kolbell has noted, they contain all the themes of guilt and forgiveness, compassion and injustice, courage and cowardice, loyalty and betrayal, and the power of life to prevail over death – themes as old as civilisation yet as relevant today as they were when the Gospels were written.<sup>1</sup> We cannot live our lives without them. One theme that runs through the whole Passion narrative is accountability. Everyone involved has agency, and yet we watch in awe and dread as the pieces fall into place, like dominoes.

Another reason for the enduring fascination of the Cross is that it is the place where we learn who we are and who God is. For the Cross reveals both the depth of our brokenness and the depth of divine love. Jesus could have saved his life but gave it up, and there is no greater expression of love in the face of rejection than to die for those who have done the rejecting. God is revealed as saying: ‘Even when you turn your back on me, I love you. Even when you pierce my hands, I love you. Even when you betray me, deny me, doubt me or abandon me, I love you.’ As the nails were driven in, Jesus said ‘Father, forgive.’ That forgiveness breaks the cycle of violence around him. Christ is the domino that

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<sup>1</sup> Erik Kolbell, *Were you there?* (2005)

does not fall, stopping all those that come after from falling too. We have seen it happen in our lifetimes, often inspired by Christ himself. In those who have found it in themselves to forgive the very people who have caused them to suffer - Nelson Mandela; Corrie ten Boom, the Dutch resistance worker; Gordon Wilson, whose daughter was killed in a terrorist attack in Northern Ireland. Breaking the cycle of violence. The courage they showed is transformational.

Being forgiven can be transformational too. In our services of Compline this week we have reflected particularly on two characters in the Passion story: Judas and Peter. It struck me all over again that they mark an essential difference in the outcome of the story. Both betray Jesus in their different ways. Yet Judas finds himself unable to live with the consequences, while Peter encounters the risen Christ, who in John's Gospel account offers him the opportunity to reverse his three denials when they share breakfast on the beach: 'Simon, son of Jonas, do you love me?' And it struck me again this week that if the Christian faith stands for anything, it is that nothing and no one is beyond redemption. There may be a long road of despair and repentance. The complicated path towards forgiveness and reconciliation may take a lifetime to travel. If others have been harmed, the processes of law and justice may need to be involved. And if we ourselves have been harmed, the difficulty of forgiving should never be underestimated. But the possibility of redemption must always exist, because redemption for the whole of humanity was won on Calvary. That is our faith.

We also have Jesus's own teaching in the parable of the mote and the beam ('Do not judge, so that you may not be judged'<sup>2</sup>), and his response to the woman

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7.1.

taken in adultery whose story we heard on Ash Wednesday, of whom Christ said, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone'<sup>3</sup>. So, if you were about to think 'yes, but...', first think on Christ. As Christ's body, we stand for the mending of what has been broken, however many pieces there are. When the penitent thief said 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom', he was not simply asking not to be forgotten, but also to be 'remembered', for all the broken pieces of his life to be put back together, to be refashioned as God would have him be. No one is beyond that promise. It lies at the heart of the Easter message.

But, for now, we wait at the foot of the Cross, aware of the weight of Christ's suffering, aware of the cost of human sinfulness, aware of the terrible price paid by Jesus in revealing the fullness of the divine love. And, deep within our brokenness, we give thanks for all that he has done.

The reason why the Passion story is so compelling is that it does not just show God's hand in Christ's destiny, but in ours too. With every action we take or refuse to take, with every opportunity for compassion or commitment taken or missed, we are either following the will of God or rejecting it. If we profess that God was revealed in Christ, then we have no choice but to live our lives in response. Like the people in the story of Good Friday, the good, the bad and the indifferent. They had no choice but to play a part in the unfolding of salvation history. Neither do we.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> John 8.7.