

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon – Second Sunday of Easter – 11<sup>th</sup> April 2021**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate*

We all have scars, some visible, some invisible. Every scar can tell a story, a funny one or a painful one, a story of defeat or one of victory, a story we are proud of and ready to share or one we are ashamed of. A scar is a visible reminder of a wound one has incurred. A scar can reveal something about who we are.

Today's Gospel reading begins with a scarred community: denial, cowardice, insecurity, fear, unbelief, confusion – these are only some of the scars that Jesus' disciples bear on the day of his resurrection. They have heard from Mary Magdalene that the tomb is empty and that she has seen the Lord. Yet their wounds make them silent and blind to what lies outside their community. A wounded community becomes locked-in.

The risen Christ is not thwarted by their fearfully locked doors: he comes to be with his disciples, he shows them his pierced hands and side, and has a mission for them: "As my Father has sent me, so I send you.", and he breathes on them the Holy Spirit. Those who are ashamed of their wounds, bereft of hope, whose lives have become meaningless, receive forgiveness, grace and peace.

They can now proclaim the Easter message, "We have seen the Lord!". They eagerly share with Thomas, who arrives at the end of the day, the news of their visitation by the risen Christ. And yet, a week later, the disciples still remain huddled behind locked doors. Their joy has been short-lived. Have they forgotten the mission they have received from Jesus? We would like their story to reach a turning point and to see them giving a response. Someone or something has to trigger them into action!

Thomas finds unconvincing the story the disciples have told him. Perhaps he cannot understand why their pattern of life remains unchanged. So he asks for evidence that their encounter with the Risen One has been real.

How embarrassing! He is not merely a late comer, but also a doubter. Artwork since the early Middle-Ages portrays him as obstinately putting his hand into Jesus' wounded side – he wants nothing less than physical evidence of the resurrection. He is also quite often represented as a very young man. Long before the days of James Fowler's theory of seven stages of faith development, the searching, questioning faith has been associated with youth, weakness, immaturity. It was considered to be similar to a childhood disease or an adolescent disorder, rather unavoidable, and something to get rid of by all means. Many of us know, as parents, as educators, that teenagers' doubts and questions can be rather difficult to deal with.

Last year, I had a surprising close encounter with a young and questioning Thomas. It happened as I was visiting a Leonardo da Vinci exhibition. The display in the first room had as its focal point a statue of Christ and St Thomas by Andrea Verrocchio – a statue I had seen on several occasions, but never so closely. It was called "The Incredulity of St Thomas". The artist has prodigiously transposed the living interaction of Jesus and Thomas in the immobility of the metal. At the geometric centre of the artwork is the wound of the Risen One. The movements of the two figures either radiate from it or converge on it. Thomas's body is caught in an upward spiral, twisted and arched by the momentum that carries him towards Christ's pierced side. Christ raises his arm in a gesture of invitation and blessing, and so offers his wound to Thomas's sight. The young man contemplates the stigmata and does not touch it. His smile shows that he is welcomed into the peace which Christ has brought.

Thomas receives his brightness from Christ, who "is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1.5). In their exchange of glances, Thomas's inner light is liberated, as he receives Christ's blessing.

It seems that for Leonardo, who was working in Verrocchio's workshop at the time when this statue was crafted, the 'encounter' with "Thomas's incredulity" was life-changing. This interaction between light and shadow became the very material of space in his paintings. I dare say that Thomas was a kindred spirit, an inspiring figure for Leonardo: never content with other people's answers and experiences, wanting to have a closer look at all that life can offer, wanting to know things for himself, asking questions others don't dare to whisper.

Yes, Thomas is not so much a doubter as a questioner, an enquirer. It is true that he asks to see the risen Jesus, but let us not forget that the other disciples have already been allowed to see him. Thomas desires a beautiful thing – a living

encounter with the Saviour. He might have grasped that resurrection can only come out of suffering, and that the scars inflicted by the world are part of Christ's story. The risen Lord bears the wounds that show he is not a stranger to human suffering. In the Resurrection, Christ's scars become part of our story, and our scars become part of God's story in our lives.

Don't try to picture Thomas probing with his finger the wound on Jesus' side. Verrocchio does not try to elucidate the mystery of the encounter. Remember that, in John's gospel, Jesus asks Thomas if he believes having seen the risen One. The invitation he has addressed to Thomas was not one to touch the body of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth, yet the body of the resurrected Christ. How could he touch a wound that, as Julian of Norwich says, is large enough for all humankind to rest in it in peace and love? The mystery of this wounded body is too great for us to grasp. The Church does not explain it, yet she does proclaim it: the body of Christ, broken for us.

The body of Christ is not only the consecrated wafer, or perhaps the Church. It encompasses the whole of humankind. It encompasses the whole universe. Yet it is a wounded body. When having our communion, whether sacramental or spiritual, we share in a broken bread, in a broken body.

As he desires to get to know this wounded body, Thomas opens himself to Christ's presence in his life and becomes a confessor. We have already heard the many titles for Jesus which the fourth Gospel opens with: the Lamb of God, the Son of God, Rabbi, Messiah, King of Israel, the Son of Man. The climax is reached with Thomas's proclamation: "My Lord and my God", words of adoration and reverence, the highest Christological confession in John's Gospel. It is much more than a doctrinal confession, it is an affirmation of trust and relationship: "**my** Lord and **my** God".

Resurrection is a relationship with Christ that will never be broken, that will never know separation. Yet how can we enter this relationship, how can we give our testimony to the resurrected Christ if we do not accept his invitation to be truly part of his body – resurrected and yet still wounded? Let us not stay locked in, let us not avert our eyes from the wounds the world bears – we may not be able to heal them, but we can at least suffer with Christ's body, experience compassion in our own bodies, in our own lives. Without compassion, how could we say "my Lord and my God"?

Thomas's story is an invitation to trust that the risen One will keep coming to us, wherever we are, regardless of the doors we lock. An invitation to dare to ask him questions, to be honest about our fears, and to yearn for experiencing more of the living Christ. He will reveal himself to us through his wounds and give us life in God's abundance and eternity.

Thomas's story is a story of faith that needs the freedom to doubt. Without this freedom, faith becomes preoccupied with a repetition of credal formulas, instead of keeping the doors wide open to welcome the Risen Lord.

Young and less young – let us be enquirers like Thomas, let us be on a journey, on a quest. Let us not stop asking God questions. Let us ask him boldly. Let us ask him joyfully.

Amen.