

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 3rd Sunday of Easter

18th April 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

‘You are witnesses of these things.’ Our Gospel passage comes on the day of resurrection, in the evening, immediately after two of the disciples have encountered Jesus on the road to Emmaus and recognised him in the breaking of the bread, returning immediately to Jerusalem to tell the others. It’s in that moment – ‘while they were talking about this’ – that Jesus stands among them.

At first the disciples are terrified and confused. We shouldn’t forget that these were the same people who three days earlier had abandoned Jesus, leaving him to suffer and die alone. They might have expected a rebuke, or at least an expression of sorrow, but instead Jesus says ‘Peace be with you’. *Shalom*. It’s the word people said when they met on the street, in doing so expressing their hope and belief that one day God’s order of peace, forgiveness and wholeness would reign on earth and people would live together in harmony. Now Jesus, crucified and risen, stands among them and with the word ‘Peace’ announces that the new order has begun. And he commissions them to carry his peace in their hearts and take it out into the world. ‘You are witnesses of these things.’

To begin with his words are received with fear. But Jesus addresses the disciples' fear and doubt and offers proof, the tangible evidence of his hands and his feet, his invitation for them to touch, and his request for and eating of food. Luke shows the disciples struggling to believe this extraordinary change of events. There's the wonderful phrase: 'in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering', which sums up the mix of emotions they feel. It's all right to find the resurrection difficult, and we often do. Is it, quite simply, too good to be true?

But what Jesus does is to 'open their minds to understand the scriptures'. If we think about the Scriptures, they are full of things that, on the face of it, were too good to be true. Abraham and Sarah in their old age have a baby that they name Isaac, which means laughter. Moses, on the run for murder, with a debilitating speech impediment and distinctly lacking in courage, becomes the means of Israel's liberation. David, the least likely of Jesse's sons, becomes Israel's greatest king. The twelve disciples, who never seem to understand what Jesus is getting at, become the means of spreading the gospel in the world. A persecutor called Saul takes the gospel beyond the boundaries of Israel into the Gentile world, as a result of which in time the Roman empire that put Jesus to death makes Christianity its official religion.

The disciples are still processing the news of the resurrection when they are surprised again. They are told that repentance and forgiveness in his name must be proclaimed to 'all nations', by them. That would have been a terrifying commission. The 'nations' meant foreign powers stronger than them - the Assyrians who had devastated the northern kingdom of Israel and the Babylonians who had done the same to the southern kingdom of Judah,

capturing the people and taking them into exile. And there's another 'nation' occupying them brutally now – imperial Rome.

Yet the effect of the resurrection, and their experience of the risen Christ, is to galvanise this forlorn little group – eleven people with the world against them and not even their own people on their side - into an unstoppable force. Normally when we fall into guilt, despondency and shame it can take years of struggle to recover our confidence. Yet the eleven did it within a matter of days. Nothing could have done that except an overwhelming encounter with all that they thought had been lost. They knew they were forgiven because they had met the one person who could forgive them, whom they never expected to see again. If anyone asks us which is harder to believe, that someone rose from the dead or that eleven beleaguered, battered people went out to change the world, we can reply that the second one happened, so perhaps that makes us feel differently about the first.

And that is still the evidence of Easter today. When you see people who have been lifted out of a wreckage of disillusionment and guilt, not by a slow and partial recovery but in a sudden release that may or may not have had anything explicit to do with faith, you cannot deny that a remarkable power is at work. We have all known people who have experienced such transformation in their lives, such experience of hope after tragedy, of affirmation after disappointment, that it seems like nothing less than a rebirth. Whenever we come to this table to receive the Eucharist, we are accepting for our own lives the eternal pattern of life through death, letting go and receiving back, in the faith that fuller life will follow. Jesus said to his followers: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'

God has one more surprise in store. 'You are witnesses to these things.' The people who are called to go out and do the witnessing now is us. The Greek word for 'witness' is 'martyr'. As we noted on Passion Sunday, it is mercifully rare these days – at least in this part of the world - that Christians are called on to witness to their faith by giving up their lives. But there are cases still. Most of us here will remember how three years ago Arnaud Beltrame, a gendarme, was called to a supermarket near Carcassonne where an armed man had shot two people and taken others hostage. Beltrame, who was a Christian, offered to take the place of the final hostage, one of the supermarket's cashiers. The offer was accepted and, in the subsequent negotiations with the assailant, Beltrame was killed. Greater love has no one than this.

Witnessing to the resurrection is the inheritance we have and the task we are given. But what does it mean in practice? For Luke, it means proclaiming 'repentance and forgiveness' in his name to all. Creating possibilities of reconciliation wherever we go. Families who won't speak to one another; friends torn apart by hurt or misunderstanding; colleagues who say they can't work together - and, all too sadly, Christian communities themselves riven by argument and faction. But it's not the Gospel. We need to sort out our differences, make peace with one another – *shalom* – and show the world how. The life of any church community must be life-giving. As one writer put it, 'the tradition of which we are the guardians is not a village pond of stagnant water but a bubbling spring of newness of life'.¹

¹ John V Taylor, *The Easter God*, p 125.

So as we prepare for our annual meeting next month and begin to look beyond it, let us keep that in mind. There is a suffering world in need of reconciliation and hope. We have been living through a tempest and it is not over yet. But the one who leads us into new life is always ahead of us, willing us on. 'He is going on ahead of you into Galilee.' As Roxana pointed out in her sermon for our Easter Vigil, Galilee is where we live and move and have our being. It is where hope danced and the nearness of the kingdom seemed tangible. And they will again. Thanks be to God.

Amen.