

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE  
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon**

**25<sup>th</sup> December 2022**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd James Johnston, Chaplain*

I wonder what it will be like celebrating Christmas in Ukraine this year. One of the most remarkable people I have met over the last ten months is Christina Laschenko, churchwarden of Christ Church Kyiv, a fellow Anglican chaplaincy in the Diocese in Europe. I haven't met her, of course, but thanks to our Diocese organising a series of online services of prayer for Ukraine over the course of the year, I feel I have got to know her a little through her reports of daily life in Kyiv, her reflections on what it means to live as a follower of Christ through these times, and through her prayers.

Christina and her family live under enormous pressure, yet she always seems poised; she is articulate, but her language is simple and direct; she is poetic, but also practical; she speaks of fear, but her posture is unflinching; and she prays from the heart. A few days ago she spoke at the last of the online Advent services of the fact that three times that day Kyiv had been subject to air raids, which had left half the city without power. Yet she went on speak of the resilience of the citizens. Behind her were Christmas decorations, yet in the city bombs were falling - a reminder that we live in dark times.

Yet darkness has always existed. Jesus was born into a world that was cruel and violent: a world of slavery and brutal occupation by a foreign power, a world of torture and injustice, where a particularly horrible means of death had been devised for those who challenged the system – crucifixion.

Those who first wrote the Christmas story knew what they were doing when they contrasted light and darkness, good and evil, hope and despair, when they wrote of the astonishing claim that the source of all that exists was to be found cradled in a young mother's arms. The life-giving creative Spirit, made known in the one called Jesus. In the words of St John which we have just heard read: 'in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'

We too face and share the darkness of human life. I don't know what darkness means for you, or for those you love and care for, this Christmas. Perhaps it is illness, chronic or sudden; the pain of loss or grief; or inner fears and anxieties. Sometimes darkness is so pervasive that we feel we can never fully avoid it. But what the birth of Jesus says is that darkness does not have the last word. That the light is to be trusted, even when we cannot see it.

Christmas reminds us that we have to do with a God who is not remote from us, but one who suffers for us and with us and who loves each one of us with a love beyond anything we can imagine. In the end our minds are not enough to comprehend it. We are invited instead to respond with our hearts.

Across the world, people are gathering in churches today because somehow they sense that in this child, and in the man he became, we come close to the

heart of God. That in Christ we are given the assurance that God is with us, one with us in our living and our dying. A God who is Christ-like, as loving and compassionate and forgiving as Jesus was. People gather on this day because they believe that, when we respond to others with instinctive acts of kindness and compassion, we are at our most authentically human, most truly ourselves, most like him. It's one of the timeless truths we glimpse again at Christmas. Christina Laschenko said on Wednesday that experience of daily life in Kyiv at the moment has shown how simple acts of love become 'a huge experience' of solidarity and hope.

To celebrate Christmas is to refuse to allow ourselves to be brought down by the darkness of the times. It is to renew our hope and trust in the God revealed in Christ, the light that shines which the darkness has not and will not overcome. To pray with others in places of suffering is to remind ourselves that we are all connected, that our compassion – our 'suffering with' – is what makes us human. And that the supreme expression of that desire and commitment to 'suffer with' is to be found in the child of Bethlehem.

A few years ago I visited Bethlehem and the country surrounding it. For those who don't know its current geography, it is in the occupied West Bank. You have to go through armed checkpoints to get to it. Our guide showed us the hillside on which it is said that the shepherds heard the angels' song on the night of Christ's birth. 'Don't walk there', he said, 'because it is full of mines'.

Following this child, and the man he became, is a risky affair. It can lead us into all sorts of trouble as it causes us to stand up for justice, defend human rights, say no to violence, discrimination and oppression, as we feed the hungry,

welcome the stranger and include the excluded. 'Don't walk there, because it is full of mines.' Yet millions of people across the world are willing to do just that. Our sisters and brothers in Kyiv are doing it now. In the end we follow this child, and the man he became, because it is what makes us most truly ourselves, more fully human because we have encountered the divine.

There's an anonymous poem that puts it this way:

The darkest time of the year,  
The poorest place in town,  
Cold, and a taste of fear,  
Man and woman alone.  
What can be hope for here?  
More light than we can learn,  
More wealth than we can treasure,  
More love than we can earn,  
More peace than we can measure,  
Because one child is born.

May I wish you all a happy and blessed Christmas.

Amen.