

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon – Second Sunday before Lent**

**Zoom Service**

**4<sup>th</sup> February 2024**

*Canon David Pickering*

The opening and closing words of this morning's Gospel reading: ***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.***

What a rich and profound array of readings we have in our lectionary this morning. They truly enhance our Ministry of the Word with their deep and thought-provoking themes.

The Old Testament reading from Proverbs speaks of the creative wonder of God's Wisdom: ***Does not wisdom call and does not understanding raise her voice? The Lord created me at the beginning of his work.*** The psalm verses sing the praises of his wisdom. ***O Lord, how wonderful are your works! In wisdom you have made them all.*** In writing to the Colossians, St. Paul gives a profound theological exposition of the nature and meaning of Jesus Christ. ***He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible.***

The biblical scholar, Leslie Holden, writes of these words, ***'This passage cannot be said to lend itself to a ten-minutes' sermon, or to be heard, momentarily, between psalm and gospel.'*** Yet Paul's words, and those of the psalm and Proverbs, are only a preface to our gospel reading of St. John's Prologue: one of the most majestic passages in the whole of scripture.

John 1. 1 to 14 has a long and interesting liturgical history. Back in the twelfth century, priests were encouraged to use it as a private prayer at the end of the mass before they disrobed. To be said in Latin of course! In the 16th century it was incorporated as a final reading at the end of the mass, after the blessing,

and still in Latin. And was known as the Last Gospel. This practice found its way into Anglican worship among some high church celebrations of the Eucharist, but read in English, of course! (I suspect we have a member of our Zoom congregation this morning who remembers this; but I won't name him). The reading of the Last Gospel came to an end in 1964, when it was omitted in the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

But John's Prologue is still a key liturgical reading. In the Book of Common Prayer it is the set Gospel reading for Christmas Day. While in the Common Worship order for Christmas Day there is a choice of three Gospel readings, John's Prologue *must* be read at one of the services. In addition the Common Worship lectionary has it as the appointed passage on the second Sunday after Christmas in each year of the three-year cycle. The final verse, ***And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth*** is used for the Gospel proclamation through the Christmas season.

But what are we to make of the WORD, which was in the beginning, was with God, was God, from which everything was made, and became one of us in the historical figure, Jesus Christ? The opening verse of the Bible in the Old Testament can perhaps help us. John opens his Gospel with a reference to this mysterious Word - which was there from the very start: ***In the beginning was the Word***. Similarly, the first verse of Genesis opens with the same phrase: ***In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth***. In both texts the word ***beginning*** does not just have a simple sense of time; its meaning has more to do with something of principal importance. Genesis and John are not talking in historical terms, but about the fundamental substance which underlies everything. So John in the opening of his Prologue, like Genesis, is writing about the basic reality of all things. And what can be more basic and universal for us human beings than words? Everything has a name, a Word. So what lies behind everything we can name is ***the Word which was with God, and the Word was God***. It is God who is in and behind all things.

Yes, God is there in everything that is good and beneficial, but what about the negative and evil things of our world, of which we can name plenty at this time? God is there, though his presence and reality seem to be missing. Even on the Cross, Jesus cried, ***My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*** He was calling to what seemed, in that desperate time, to be his absent Father. But even in the darkest moments, God's presence can be restored.

Today's gospel presents us with a God who through his Word can be seen in all things, and is uniquely in Jesus Christ. And the words we speak and think day by day are a wonderful gift of God. How we choose them shapes and defines our lives, so perhaps we might put greater value on the words we use in everyday living. All our words, thoughts and conversations are framed by the words God has given us. And as he is the Word, he is present in them. When words are used in a negative or deceptive manner, then we are desecrating and negating God in our lives and the beauty of his creation. In the same way, all our positive words are expressions of God's presence in our lives and in our world. The Word is made flesh among us, and in us!

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon – Second Sunday before Lent**

**All Saints' Marseille**

**4<sup>th</sup> February 2024**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

What on earth, you might be wondering, is going on? Last week the Chaplain told us we had to put away Christmas because at Candlemas it was time to turn our thoughts towards Lent and Easter. So we put away the crib figures and swept up the remains of the tinsel on the floor. And then today he stands up and reads the Christmas Gospel. We knew our Chaplain was incompetent, but really...

Many people puzzle why this Gospel reading is set for the Second Sunday before Lent. The explanation is that, around forty years ago when the Alternative Service Book was introduced, the Church of England decided to liven up 'ordinary time' by introducing themes for different Sundays. This Sunday was designated Creation Sunday, with readings on the theme of creation. But with the introduction of the current prayer book, Common Worship, twenty years ago that idea evaporated, so Creation Sunday isn't mentioned any more. (In fact, we get a whole of month of Creationtide in September.) But the readings are still there in the Church of England's calendar. One can see why, for they are three of the most beautiful passages in the Bible, and they illuminate one another in interesting ways as they seek to express the significance of Jesus.

It is interesting to read the passage from Proverbs alongside the Prologue to the Gospel of John, with its beautiful picture of Wisdom working alongside God at the dawn of creation. Wisdom was important in the Old Testament. We recall how, when the young King Solomon was asked by God what he wished for more than anything at the start of his reign, God was delighted when he asked not for possessions, wealth, honour or long life, but for wisdom. (2 Chronicles 7-10.)

The writer of the Fourth Gospel, trying to express Jesus's significance in a way that would be accessible to both the Jewish and Greek cultures that formed his audience, wrote about it in terms of 'the Word'. Both cultures already revered a concept known as 'the Word'. In the Old Testament, the 'word of God' was God's way of being active, calling creation into being. Later the concept of the Word became associated with the Wisdom of God that brought the divine will to people's hearts and minds. For the Greeks, the word (the *Logos*), was the principle of order under which the universe existed. It also gave people knowledge of truth and the ability to judge between right and wrong.

So the writer devised a way of speaking about Christ's arrival that was equally striking in both Jewish and Greek cultures: 'the Word became flesh.' It was saying that the powerful, creative force which gives order to the universe and intelligence to human beings, was to be found in a person.

Paul expresses it differently in his Letter to the Church at Colossae, but the direction of his thinking is the same. He writes of Jesus as 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible.' The message of John's opening words is that there is a pattern of Love which expresses itself in everything that comes to be, and that it is strikingly visible in Jesus.

What all three of our readings this morning seek to express in their different ways is that we will find in Jesus not only the fullest expression of our humanity, but also of the divine energy which lies at the heart of things.

What are we to do about it? I think our Collect for today offers an answer:

‘Almighty God, you have created the heavens and the earth and made us in your own image: teach us to discern your hand in all your works and your likeness in all your children.’

These are important things to take with us into our daily lives. We did not create the world. We are dependent on a loving creator, whose image we bear. We owe it to that creator to care for the creation entrusted to us, and the people we share it with, recognizing that we are interdependent with one another, and ultimately dependent on God. If, collectively, we could manage to do this, I suspect the world would feel a lot less worrying than it does at the moment. We would care properly for the planet, ‘discerning God’s hand in all God’s works’. And we might even learn to live at peace with one another, ‘seeing God’s likeness in all God’s children’.

All God’s children. Including the ones societies – and, sadly, churches - tend to reject. Those on the outside, those on the margins. We must never forget that Jesus took his place with them, the ones rejected by power because they were weak, the ones who were discredited, the ones who were an embarrassment. He is mysteriously present in them still. Often we find that, precariously, they live by grace and minister it to others.

Our Collect today also encourages us to ask ourselves: Who do I ‘other’? Who do I scapegoat? Who do I make assumptions about and judge without knowing them as another ‘I’? We all do it, and we need to be on our guard. Institutions,

churches included, instinctively try to protect themselves from the one who is different, the outsider. But it's not the Gospel.

It has been estimated that this year 40% of the world's democracies will be holding elections, including the US and the UK as well as the European parliamentary elections in the summer. At these times there is a heightened risk of 'othering', because people are defined by opposition – 'they' say this, 'we' say that – and politicians love nothing more than to find scapegoats. But the 1940s showed us what happens when scapegoating spirals out of control. The seeds are in the wind again, and it is – well, worrying.

As a corrective to the risk of 'othering', our Collect reminds us to hold onto what people have always glimpsed in Jesus. From the beginning, people saw in him what one writer called 'the unfathomable Creator disclosed in human action'<sup>1</sup>. And, having glimpsed it, we can do our best to model our actions on his. Which might be more productive than sitting in front of our screens worrying about things we can't control.

'And the Word was made flesh and lived among us.' The priest-poet Jim Cotter, meditating on that ending of the Prologue of John, wrote this: 'We saw your glory, divine glory shining through a human face, as a mother's eyes live through her daughter's, as a son reflects his father's image, your glory in a human being fully alive.'<sup>2</sup>

It's a timely reminder to take with us today. Even if it isn't Christmas.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> John V Taylor, *The Incarnate God* (2004), p 6.

<sup>2</sup> Jim Cotter et al, *Darkness Yielding* (2009), p 69.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon –Sunday next before Lent**

**Transfiguration Sunday – Racial Justice Sunday**

**All Saints' Marseille**

**11<sup>th</sup> February 2024**

*The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate*

Chariots of fire, a mantle that can part the water, dazzling garments, Elijah and Moses brought back from the past to converse with Jesus. Witness Elijah ascending in a whirlwind into heaven, and Jesus being transfigured on the mountaintop. For those drawn to spectacular narratives and dramatic displays, this is the Sunday in the church's year not to be missed. One might even envy Peter, James and John for their front-row seats to an immersive sound and light show.

Yet, in our modern, disenchanted world, many of us grapple with how to interpret the significance of the Transfiguration story. Are we reading a historical account embellished over time, a truth conveyed through mythological allegory, or a theological metaphor with deeper implications?

On this Racial Justice Sunday, another perspective emerges: the Scripture passages we've just read could hint at the notion that being dazzling white is the ideal way to be, but also that darkness needs light to be deemed acceptable. In the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book for 2024, *Tarry Awhile: Wisdom from Black Spirituality for People of Faith*, author Selina Stone warns against trying to force everything, even theological arguments, into a 'light versus dark' dichotomy. Such binary frameworks, though helpful for illustrating some spiritual or theological concepts, can be problematic. Stone says, "Race, which categorises humanity in a hierarchy of 'light' at the top and 'dark' at the bottom, could be seen as a prime example of the problems of this binary thinking." She continues, "We have to be mindful of how use of language can affect how we view or treat one another."



Mark's Gospel certainly offers here the echo of an event that has made a great impression on the disciples. Decades after the Transfiguration, the second Letter of Peter appealed to the disciples' experience on the mountain to rebut criticism that the first communities of believers followed "cleverly devised myths." No, the author says, "we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1.16-18). Over the centuries, the Transfiguration has steadily accumulated meanings – most of them deeply theological: it visibly manifested the union of human and divine in Jesus Christ, affirmed his place in the stream of Israel's history of salvation, confirmed his Messiahship which Peter had confessed before their ascension on the mountain, and prefigured Christ's coming in glory at the end of times. Few events reported in the New Testament are so rich.

While the Transfiguration may have initially appeared daunting for the Western mindset, which often gravitates towards analysis, categorisation and rational explanation, it has long captivated the Eastern churches. Since the 4<sup>th</sup> or the 5<sup>th</sup> century, its commemoration has stood as one of the great feasts in the liturgical calendar, holding equal stature with Epiphany, Ascension and Pentecost. Western churches are now endeavouring to rekindle a deeper understanding of this event, perhaps seeking a more mystical dimension beyond the confines of their traditional interpretations. The dazzling brilliance and the celestial voice coming from the cloud challenge complacent and perfunctory faith, inviting believers to a renewed encounter with the divine. A 'mystery of light par excellence', that's how John Paul II described the Transfiguration.

Mark's narration of the Transfiguration is succinct: "He was transfigured before them." The vision cannot be fully captured in words. The events on the mountain are shrouded in mystery – inviting contemplation and meditation, promising transformative power when internalised by the disciple. This echoes the ethos of the Eastern tradition of icons. They are, in many ways, aids to instruction and to spiritual introspection. Icons function akin to sermons, conveying something about the mystery of Christ, which is offered for contemplation and prayer. In earlier times, every painter who took up icon 'writing' had to commence his craft with the depiction of the Transfiguration. This act symbolized not merely painting with colours, but rather capturing the uncreated light of the Transfiguration, training the artist's eyes to perceive its radiance, which would permeate every subsequent work.

In Theophanes the Greek's icon, featured on the service sheet, the disciples prostrate themselves in fear and awe before the splendour and the holiness unfolding before them. Yet they are not mere witnesses, they are participants.

On the mountain, the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ is revealed – despite the confusion, imperfection and misunderstanding of the disciples. They are touched by rays emanating from Christ - light, energy, holiness, and glory - purifying and transforming them. As Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans, through Christ they receive “the hope of sharing the glory of God” (Romans 5.2). Though this glory may not yet be tangible, the promise is palpable, demanding faith from each of Christ’s disciples: “Listen to him.”

The Gospel narrative of the Transfiguration, capturing the moment when the disciples beheld Jesus in his full glory – a vivid reality of how God’s love goes beyond our imagination - is an invitation to perceive beyond appearances and acknowledge the presence of Christ, who has come to illuminate our human journey. Each of us is called to seek out the transfigured Christ in the world, not merely to marvel and rejoice in that presence, but also to heed and respond with the heart of a disciple. It is in our everyday lives that God’s glory must radiate, so that others may be bathed in his light as we have been.

The essence of the Transfiguration proclaims that the glory of God defies containment. Peter's impulse to build tabernacles on the mountaintop is futile. God's glory demands to spill forth into the valleys of our world. While we may never experience anything as powerful as the Transfiguration, each day, in countless and perhaps small ways, God’s glory permeates our lives - sometimes in unexpected ways, often in ordinary glimpses of extraordinary love. It is transformative and calls us to serve all of God’s children, with justice, honesty, and humility. May we be open to this call, prepared to embody the boundless, transfiguring glory of God. May we be given the grace to shine in the world with this light that never fades, because God is its inexhaustible and eternal source.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon – Sunday next before Lent**

**Eglise du Sacré-Coeur, Oppède**

**Eglise Protestante Unie, Manosque**

**11<sup>th</sup> February 2024**

*Christine Portman, Reader*

After two cold days of heavy rain and dark skies, how refreshing to hear readings filled with fire and light! This morning's readings recount two strange events, separated by nearly a millennium: in the first, from the OT, Elijah separated from Elisha by chariots and horses of fire whisked up into heaven by a whirlwind, and from the New, the Transfiguration of Jesus. What did you make of them? Some find both hard to credit, but have you ever seen the physical transformation of people when they fall in love? It's surely not so difficult to imagine the changes in Jesus as witnessed by the disciples. I had an older cousin, a very 'Plain Jane'. None of us thought she'd ever have a boyfriend, let alone marry. But suddenly there was a new man in her life. Her skin positively glowed as she talked about him. We could scarcely believe the transformation. Mood can change our appearance – apparently a rise in dopamine levels is the cause. But what we see in the accounts of the Transfiguration is extraordinary. In a lovely, homely detail, Mark says his clothes became *dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them*. To understand the significance of this event it's worth looking at the similarities of the three synoptic gospels. Moses and Elijah and three key disciples, Peter, James and John are always present.

Firstly, what should we make of the presence of Moses and Elijah? They're figures of huge importance in Jewish tradition: the first represents the Law, and the second, the Prophets. Both climbed mountains, seeking God's presence. We're told Moses' face was so transformed by the experience that he had to veil his glowing face. In the gospel accounts, after Jesus becomes transfigured, the prophets appear and talk with him. Peter, impulsive as always, blurts out *let us*

*make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. Like the others he's terrified and in his confusion he's no idea how to respond. Then, out of the cloud, comes God's voice: 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'. Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.*

God's people had always been told to *listen to Moses and Elijah*. And they do remain important figures: when Jesus gives his New Commandment, he specifically says *on this hangs all the Law and the prophets*. But the Transfiguration marks an important change - now we must listen to Jesus. As Paul writes in this morning's epistle, the disciples have witnessed *the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*. Peter, James and John have known him until now as Jesus of Nazareth, now they see him in his true glory. He is the Christ.

So the presence of Moses and Elijah on the mountain points to Jesus' true essence, and *where* the Transfiguration occurs in the gospels is also key. In all three, it happens just after Jesus reveals his coming fate: *the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again* (Mark 8.31). And in all the accounts it's preceded by Jesus' prophetic words: *Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power* (Mark 9.1). Peter, James and John who see his full, divine power, are the same three who would be with him in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The second letter of Peter vividly recalls that day on the mountain. It's worth repeating, because it was clearly life-changing for the disciples who had witnessed the transfiguration:

*For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.*

*So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no*

*prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*

Bill Bright comments: *The Transfiguration pulled a veil aside for Peter, James, and John. They got to see and understand the world in a way the other disciples didn't yet. They witnessed that life was made up of more than what their eyes could see and their ears could hear. They were to share in Christ's glory and to share that glory with others, and that's the essential point we need to take away from the Transfiguration. On these dark winter days, surrounded by gloomy news from across the globe, perhaps not many of us arrived feeling particularly glorious or surrounded by light. And I suppose none of us considers ourselves to be particularly holy. Do we imagine ourselves numbered among the saints? But, flawed as we are, and flawed as those disciples were, this is what Jesus calls us to be. *Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these* (John 14.12) He knows that we have the capacity to empty ourselves of our human selfishness, to open ourselves to the immense riches of the grace he would love to pour into us. He has faith in us.*

When we recognise where we've fallen short of the best God wills for us, it seems incredibly presumptuous to think that we too could possibly share in Christ's glory - but that's precisely what he calls us to do. Like Peter and the other disciples, we've been called to share in Christ's glory, and to share that glory with others.

Pope Francis comments: *"From the event of the Transfiguration I would like to take two significant elements that can be summed up in two words: ascent and descent. We all need to go apart, to ascend the mountain in a space of silence, to find ourselves and better perceive the voice of the Lord. This we do in prayer. But we cannot stay there! Encounter with God in prayer inspires us anew to 'descend the mountain' and return to the plain where we meet many weighed down by fatigue, sickness, injustice, ignorance, poverty both material and spiritual. To these in difficulty, we are called to bear the fruit of that experience with God, by sharing the grace we have received".*

We're called to be lights in a needy world: in the first hymn we sang *Fill me, Radiance divine*. In the last, we'll sing of going out *in the strength of God* so that *the light of the glorious gospel of truth may shine throughout the world*. This week we begin our journey through Lent. Like Peter, James and John we'll move

from Christ's glory to his suffering – but then on to the triumph of Easter Day. So as we pray and reflect on all that this means, let's do so in hope, knowing that God trusts us to work his purpose out. As he relied on the prophets and on Jesus, he now relies on us.

*Nearer and nearer draws the time,  
the time that shall surely be,  
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God  
as the waters cover the sea.*

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon – First Sunday of Lent**

**All Saints' Marseille**

**18<sup>th</sup> February 2024**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

One of the most striking things about Mark's Gospel is its sparseness. In just a few sentences, we are given the accounts of Jesus's baptism, his sense of affirmation by God, his being driven into the wilderness and the temptations that followed, and his arrival back in Galilee to begin his ministry. We could spend a morning looking at any one of those events, but Mark doesn't give us time.

What the Gospel writer does, though, is offer us echoes. In our short reading there are echoes of three different texts from the Old Testament. (It has been said that if you took out all the references to the Old Testament from the New, it would only be half the length.) The first echo is of Psalm 2, a short, powerful poem in which the kingdoms of the world are shown that they cannot do without God, who appoints a king to rule over them. In the Psalm, the king appointed hears the words: 'You are my son; today I have begotten you.'

The second echo is from the 'servant' songs of the Prophet Isaiah (chapters 40 to 55), which describe the figure of a 'suffering servant': 'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights'. The third echo is again from Isaiah, this time chapter 64, which contains the invocation to God: 'O that

you would tear open the heavens and come down.’ As Jesus ‘comes up out of the water’ he sees the heavens ‘torn apart’ and the Spirit descending like a dove.

So Mark wants his hearers to understand, first, that the voice heard at Jesus’s baptism is appointing him to the role of that king who will bring in God’s rule. Secondly, that this will be brought about through identification with the figure of the ‘suffering servant’ prophesied by Isaiah, a figure with whom Jesus identifies himself during his ministry. Mark is warning that Jesus’s inauguration of the kingdom of God will, like Isaiah’s servant, involve his suffering and death.

For Mark’s original hearers there are echoes, too, of their foundational story, the Exodus – their delivery from slavery through the Red Sea into the desert, then on through the River Jordan into the promised land. Now Jesus is leading the way through water into a new world, a new time, filled with new possibility. He goes into the desert for forty days, like the ancient Israelites wandering in the desert for forty years. Like Noah, too, with his forty days in the ark on the flood waters. Then Jesus returns, announcing: ‘This is the time. The kingdom is arriving. This is the good news.’

That’s what this text, with all its echoes, would have suggested to those who first heard it, Mark’s ‘good news’, as it was read to them soon after Jesus’s lifetime. What might it mean for us now, two millennia later?

Let’s take the events in order. We have just begun our journey of Lent, that season in the Church’s year when we are encouraged to step aside from the things that clamour for our attention the rest of the time, and to try and find some stillness to contemplate the things that matter most – the ‘things eternal’.



Stripping away what is inessential, trying to be honest with ourselves, standing before God without trying to hide the things we are ashamed of. Finding our way back to God's generous heart, sorry for the things we wish we hadn't done, or wish we had. In all this, it's important for us to keep hold of the words Jesus heard as he came up out of the water of baptism, for we too have been baptised into his company: 'You are my son, my daughter; I love you; I delight in you.' So often we are our own worst critics. So often we feel ourselves not to be lovable. But that's not the message of the Gospel, which is about God's unbounded love for us. It's about having life, life in all its fullness. For God loves us more extravagantly than we can ever love ourselves. If you don't believe it, read the parable of the prodigal child.

But it mustn't make us complacent. Sadly, there's a smugness about some forms of Christianity. In Mark's Gospel, we are not given the detail of the temptations confronted by Jesus, but in Matthew and Luke we learn that they are what have been described as 'greed, ambition and pride'<sup>3</sup>, temptations that beset many a religious endeavour. It's only if we can avoid these that we will have any right to ask others to 'believe in the good news', as Jesus does when he returns successful from his confrontation.

So we see in our Gospel today a movement from becoming aware of the affirmation of God, through confronting temptations to use it wrongly, to the ability to share real good news.

Meanwhile Lent is a wilderness time. We all have such times in our lives, mostly not of our choosing. Wilderness times include illness, the loss of loved ones, loss

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Leech, in *True God: An exploration in spiritual theology*.

of employment, loss of financial security, having to leave places we have called home. Many at present are finding their mental health undermined by all that seems wrong in the world. These are tough times. Jesus, we are told, was 'with the wild beasts'. A hostile, savage place, where he felt alone.

Yet there were also, unexpectedly, angels. It's a feature of times of desolation that somehow we experience positive things too. Encountering strangers who bring us comfort. Finding little things done for us that make a world of difference. How can we be as angels to others during this season? Who do you know is feeling low, who could do with a little kindness? Who do you need to be reconciled with?

It's good to think about these things during Lent. As we allow some of our frenetic activity to subside, we may find ourselves wondering: when all is said and done, what matters most? Do we give thanks for it? Do we treasure it properly? Jesus taught that where our treasure is, our heart will be also. This sort of self-examination helps us live more freely, more fully, closer to the One who created us. Returning to God in simplicity and honesty, owning up to our failures and being met, not by judgment, but by one like a father running towards us, embracing us in love.

Whatever our wilderness experiences, chosen or not, let us remember that Christ has been there too, and that the same is true of the whole of our lives. For the message of the Gospel is that, in Christ, God is with us always – in life, in death, and in life beyond. And that is good news.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon**

**Second Sunday of Lent - 25<sup>th</sup> February 2024**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate*

'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected [...], and be killed. [...] Jesus said all this quite openly.'

From our vantage point, post-Resurrection, it is easy to underestimate the impact these words had on Jesus' disciples. They had witnessed his miraculous acts of healing, hung on his every word as he taught with authority, and marvelled at his charisma that effortlessly drew crowds. They had embraced his proclamation, of an everlasting kingdom of God, transcending earthly limitations. Peter himself had acknowledged Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, God's anointed one, the chosen vessel to fulfil God's covenant with Abraham. Yet, now Jesus speaks of vulnerability, enmity, suffering, and, ultimately, death – a stark departure from the triumphant narrative they had envisioned.

This is unacceptable! The notion of the Messiah enduring suffering is utterly scandalous to Peter. Enveloped in a haze of bewilderment and sadness, Peter pulls Jesus aside to rebuke him. How could Jesus dare to entertain a path contrary to the fervent expectations of his devoted followers?

From our perch of historical hindsight, we regard these disciples with a mixture of pity and mild impatience. Swiftly, we dismiss them as ensnared by a misguided comprehension of the Messiah's role. Yet, we must tread cautiously before casting judgement upon Peter: he serves as a reflection of our own inclinations. He longs for a formidable Messiah, a resolute leader. Does our era stand apart in this regard? Do we not also yearn for a potent deity to rectify all injustices and usher in the peace that eludes human grasp? And, indeed,

observe the enduring allure of the myth of the powerful leader, with a muscular persona, that exerts its sway upon us even now.

It will be only much later that the disciples will understand that, in the words of Paul, “God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” (1 Corinthians 1:25).

Peter’s expectations may falter in light of Jesus’ words, yet Jesus is indeed fulfilling God’s covenant with Abraham – while reshaping it. The promise to Abraham, which we heard in our reading from Genesis, assured a fruitful descendance, blessed abundantly by God – an assurance of a life-rich future. Jesus invites his disciples to partake in a covenant of life as well, albeit through a path far removed from their expectations. He assures them of abundant life – yet they cannot be mere bystanders: ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’

Jesus’ words may strike us as severe, his path as extreme. I guess this was not the vision Peter had in mind when Jesus invited him, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ How often do we contemplate our discipleship as entailing self-denial and embracing the weight of our own crosses?

Consider this: the twelve disciples have already renounced much. They have relinquished all - tools, trades, homes, families, and friendships – to answer the call of Jesus. Have they not already borne the cost of discipleship? What more could be asked of them? Must they now stifle their desires and aspirations, harbour self-loathing, seek out suffering or martyrdom? One thing is certain: following Jesus was never meant to make life easy, foreseeable, or straightforward.

What, then, does it truly for us to deny ourselves in order to heed the call of Jesus? We’ve been assured that we are God’s beloved children, our very identity holding significance in his eyes. And yet, is Jesus asking us to deny it? Then self-denial poses a formidable challenge. Caesarius, the 6<sup>th</sup>-century bishop of Arles, has a word of encouragement: ‘When the Lord tells us in the Gospel that anyone who wants to be his follower must renounce themselves, the injunction seems harsh; we think he is imposing a burden on us. But an order is no burden when it is given by one who helps in carrying it out.’ At the core of Christ’s Gospel lies this truth: God desires for his children happiness and abundant life, solace for those in despair, justice for the oppressed, consolation for the weary and the downtrodden.

And so Jesus calls his followers to embrace new dimensions of their identity. Self-denial, far from being an act of self-annihilation, represents a complete redefinition: a shifting of focus wherein God assumes primacy in our lives. It entails relinquishing a sense of control to surrender to the mysteries of God, aligning our will with his intentions, and saying, 'Thy will be done.' It means to remain steadfast in upholding the priorities laid out by Jesus in the two 'great commandments' — to love God and love our neighbour.

The life of a disciple unfolds as a journey, not as an instantaneous attainment. It is a journey marked by moments akin to those experienced by Peter — wherein both faith and incomprehension find voice. It's a journey where we allow Christ identity to gradually shape our own. It is a journey of following the choices Jesus Christ has made: in a world that clamours to take, Jesus chose to give; amidst hatred, he embraced love; amid injury, he offered healing; in the face of death, he bestowed life. He extended mercy where vengeance sought solace, forgiveness where condemnation reigned, and compassion where indifference held sway. Amidst claims of scarcity, he trusted in God's abundance. With each deliberate choice, he diverged from the world's norms, demonstrating the ever-present presence of God.

We began our journey with Jesus at our baptism, marked on our forehead with the sign of the cross - sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. For each of us, the mandate to 'take up our cross' as disciples is intimately intertwined with the unfailing love of God, which was palpably present at our baptism.

'Deny yourself and take up your cross' – this is an invitation into what the cross means: God's commitment to humanity, God's presence amidst our brokenness, his pursuit of life and renewal. Thus, to shoulder a cross akin to Jesus is to position oneself at the epicentre of the world's anguish, assuming a stance of vulnerability and receptivity — as a living sign of God's boundless love.

Where is Jesus inviting us to follow him in our lives right now? This might be the time to actively embark upon that stride of fidelity, vulnerability, of living and sharing, in word and deed, the Gospel of the advent of God's Kingdom.

Though the disciples may have overlooked it amidst their apprehension, there lay words of hope within what Jesus said that day. Jesus would indeed endure death, but he would also rise again. Yet we cannot fully grasp the meaning of Christ's resurrection unless we are willing to embrace Christ crucified. The fifty

days of Easter find their meaning only after the forty days of Lent. Easter morning finds its fulfilment solely through Good Friday.

As we move deeper into Lent, may we taste the hope that prepares us to bear the cross of the present.

Amen.