

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon**

**Fourth Sunday of Lent – Mothering Sunday - 10<sup>th</sup> March 2024**

**Oppède and Manosque**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

For many people, Mothering Sunday conjures up images of a joyful day of celebration in the midst of the otherwise sombre time of Lent, a day when flowers are presented, families brought together, children run riot in church, meals are shared, cards exchanged, loving words spoken, good memories shared. Let us hope that for many people this is a truly happy day.

But it's also a day that is less than straightforward. While the figure of a mother is marked into every human life, experiences of mothering are different. For some, whether we are mothers or children, this is a day when an absence is felt, through loss or grief, or loss of relationship. For others, there is memory or actuality of wanting to become mothers and it not being possible, or of it turning out to be a struggle when it happens. For others still, there's the experience of not having felt called to be mothers and feeling judged because of it. And not forgetting fathers who are not in a position to celebrate this day with the mothers of their children. It can be a complicated day, and our prayers on this day are always with those who struggle because of it.

Today's Bible readings highlight three aspects of motherhood that we might reflect on as we continue our journey through Lent. The first, highlighted in our Old Testament reading, is courage. The woman in the story is not named, though in the book of Numbers we learn that her name is Jochebed, the mother of Moses. Her brave actions save the life of her child. She is part of an enslaved people, the ancient Israelites in Egypt. Just before the reading begins, Pharaoh has issued an order to the midwives who attend Israelite women that, in order to control the enslaved population, male children are to be killed at birth. And so the baby in this story is in danger of violence, both racially motivated and gender-based. This is mothering in highly precarious conditions. The choices Jochebed makes are recognisable to women across the world, not least today in Ukraine or Gaza.

Whether or not we are mothers ourselves, Jochebed's story asks us on this Mothering Sunday what we will fight to save, even when we think we can do so little. For whom will we stick our necks out, take action to protect? For whom or what will we challenge the system, be creative in getting round the rules?

The second aspect of motherhood, highlighted in our Gospel reading, is suffering. Any mother will tell you that it comes as part of the package. The picture which the Gospels give us is of Mary. In our reading, she brings her baby to the Temple to present him to the Lord, as required under the religious law. She is amazed by the reactions her child inspires in people. But she is also told that she will suffer – 'a sword will pierce through your own soul'.

Mothering Sunday, through this short reading about Mary, asks of us who or what it is that allows our souls to be pierced through by the consequences and demands of love. What breaks our heart open so that it never closes again to

the rest of the world? As The Revd Lucy Winkett, Rector of St James's Piccadilly in London, once put it: 'To love like that is to give expression to something of the fierce, self-giving, ... patient, creative love that's holding the stars apart and the universe in being, and that became incarnate and visible in Christ, and Christ crucified - the fullness of divine love, whose fingerprint is on every soul'<sup>1</sup>.

Mary saw her son grow up, leave home, become an inspiration to his followers and a whole community. Yet, in doing so, he incurred jealousy, fear and anger from the religious and political leaders of his time, which reached its peak in Jerusalem in the week we call Holy. His mother walked with him – as we shall do in heart and mind that week – through betrayal, arrest, torture, trial, crucifixion and death. Tragically, sometimes it comes as part of the package. Ask the mother of Alexei Navalny.

The picture at the top of your service sheets is of Michelangelo's Pietà, Mary cradling her crucified son. Later this year, another Pietà will become visible to the world again. I wonder if you know it. It's in the sanctuary of Notre-Dame de Paris which, God willing, will open to the public in December for the first time after the devastating fire of 2018. The face on the statue of Michelangelo has a stillness about it, Mary's head bowed as if in prayer. The face on the statue in Notre-Dame is nothing like it. On her face is a look of sheer anguish, and from her mouth there comes a silent scream. The Pietà in Notre Dame tells of all the heartache and desolation of the human condition. When you are close to it, that is all you can see.

But there's a third aspect of motherhood, highlighted in our New Testament reading. Just as in parenting God invites us to share in his work of creating, so he also invites us to share in his work of healing. The third aspect touched upon

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<sup>1</sup> Reading the Bible with your Feet (2021).

in our New Testament reading is consolation, something mothers are very good at giving. Something that reflects the God in whose image we are made. If, on your way out of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, you look back at the Pietà, you may notice something you did not see when you were too close to its agony. On either side of Mary are two small figures – two angels, sorrowful but determined. They do not touch her, yet they hold her between them, silently watching, willing her on. They offer a reminder that we are held in the divine embrace even through the worst that can happen to us. A reminder that, in the words of St Paul, nothing can separate us from the love of God, ‘the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled’ (2 Corinthians 3 - 4).

It is significant that the two angels (traditionally, messengers of God) are to be found at the point in time that lies between crucifixion and resurrection. When we get to Holy Week, we will find God, where we always do, at the foot of the Cross, and in the life beyond it revealed at Easter. For resurrection is about the eternal re-generativity of God. And, seen in its light, the crucifixion offers us the assurance that in Christ evil and suffering are absorbed, transformed and finally defeated.

So as we give thanks today for mothering, with all its joys and challenges, we will shortly turn to celebrate the Eucharist, in which Christ’s body will become our food and we in turn will become the body of Christ, sent out into the world to become his feet, hands and eyes, to bring comfort to those in the dark valley. Sent out with courage to confront suffering with consolation - and perhaps, in doing so, find consolation ourselves.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon**

**Fourth Sunday of Lent – 10<sup>th</sup> March 2024**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate*

'At last, in spite of all, a recognition,  
For those who loved and laboured for so long,  
Who brought us, through that labour, to fruition  
To flourish in the place where we belong.'

These lines are drawn from Malcolm Guite's poem for Mothering Sunday – a day on the Church's calendar when we seek to give thanks for our mothers, reminiscing about the shared joys and tears over the years, moments of celebration or sorrow, reflecting on how their love shaped our life journey. We honour our mothers - and all the world's mothers - whose work, in Guite's words, 'the world has overlooked, neglected, but in their lives [God's] Kingdom is reflected.' Being a mother is undeniably one of the most demanding, challenging, heart-wrenching, anxiety-inducing, yet joyful jobs in the world. Whatever we try to express today will inevitably fall short of articulating the true value of a mother – if such worth could ever be quantified. A Jewish proverb offers a wise insight: 'God could not be everywhere, and therefore he made mothers.'

The Scriptures offer a rich collection of maternal figures, each one a unique and intricate portrait: from Sarah, mother of Isaac, to Hagar, mother of Ismael; from Jochebed, mother of Moses, to Hannah, mother of Samuel; from Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, to Mary, mother of Jesus, among many others. These women exemplified endurance, patience, hope, and selflessness; they loved their children with boundless affection and placed unreserved trust in God's purpose.

The Church has idealised Mary as the epitome of motherhood, a portrayal that Christian devotion has oversimplified and sentimentalised over the centuries. However, the Mary depicted in the Bible is a complex figure with whom many women and mothers can identify: Mary, who shows extraordinary courage, faith and trust, so that she can say 'yes' to God when so many would have said 'no'. Mary, who risks shame and rejection to fulfil her calling to give birth to the Messiah. Mary, who must become a refugee in Egypt to escape king Herod's wrath. Mary, who encourages the first of Jesus' signs at the wedding at Cana by not contenting herself with her Son's refusal. Mary, whom Jesus later apparently ignores, telling his followers that his family are those who do the will of God, not those related by blood. Mary, who remains nevertheless at the Cross, when so many of Jesus' friends and disciples have fled.

Mary's role as the mother of Jesus is captured in today's brief yet moving passage from Luke's Gospel: Mary, a new mother, finds herself in the Temple, overwhelmed by the reaction her child provokes. She receives a prophetic word from Simeon, who foretells that her son will be responsible for the falling and rising of many, and ominously predicts that she will endure anguish, as 'a sword will pierce [her] own soul too.' Through Simeon's words, the future suffering of Jesus, culminating in his passion and death, are subtly foreshadowed. Did Mary remember these words at the foot of the Cross?

These few lines encapsulate the two iconic images of Mary: firstly, as the nurturing mother, holding her infant son, a subject depicted in countless paintings and icons. Secondly as the Pietà: following the crucifixion, Mary cradles Jesus once more, now as a broken adult. This dual portrayal mirrors the complex reality of motherhood today, as read or seen in news headlines: mothers in situations of violence, a plight familiar to women worldwide, the piercing agony of helplessly witnessing their children suffer or die.

The glimpses offered by the Gospels into the life of Mary suggest that the mother of Jesus grappled with the difficult task of letting her child go, much like Hannah did with Samuel. By allowing Samuel to leave her, Hannah played her role in fulfilling God's plan for him as a judge and prophet of Israel. As Mary saw Jesus departing from Nazareth, his path inevitably leading towards Jerusalem and Golgotha, she knew this was part of God's purpose for him, understanding that her role was to let him go.

Mothering means nurturing, loving, caring – and letting go. To help someone's journey towards fulfilling their own calling from God, we must, in a spirit of love,

release our hold. And this is not only the task of mothers, but the work of an entire community: parents, grandparents, extended family, friends, teachers, churches... Assuming a 'mothering' role is not about imposing our own needs or ideals or ambitions upon those we care for. While their values and paths may not align with our aspirations for them, we, like Mary and Hannah, must place our trust in God's purpose. 'Letting go' is hard and challenging, but often essential to pave the way for a return.

The passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians serves as a reminder that all love has its source in the boundless love of God. All consolation comes from God, 'the Father of mercies', and it flows abundantly to us, so that we may extend it to others. This serves as our 'mission letter' to become a 'mothering' church: a place of safety and nurture, where people can explore and question, discover who they truly are and discern where God might be calling them. A place where people can make mistakes, know themselves forgiven, a place where fresh beginnings are embraced. A place where people are empowered to flourish as members of a community of love and service. A 'mothering' church lets people go out into the world with confidence and courage, to face its challenges and illuminate it with the light of Christ - knowing that they are always welcome to return for refreshment and renewal.

This is our 'mission letter': to uphold our responsibility towards one another; to create a place of mutual accountability, where our ability to forgive, practise patience, and extend compassion is continuously expanded by God's grace; to share with one another the duty and work of care and nurture, as well as the joys and challenges of life.

On this day, let us pray that God may guide us in discovering and nurturing more deeply our gifts for 'mothering', so that others may catch a glimpse of God's generous and transforming love, and that in our lives, too, his Kingdom may be reflected.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent – 17<sup>th</sup> March 2024**

**Zoom service**

*Canon David Pickering*

John 12.23. ***Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”***

Today we have so many ways and means of telling the time. The watch I wear has a solar panel face which cleverly charges the battery throughout the day. It also tells me the days of the week and the months of the year: such are the wonders of modern technology! Yet although displays of the time are all around us, the wearing of a watch is for many nothing more than a fashion accessory. I once stayed with someone who had a large display cabinet in his bedroom. It was full of very expensive watches, so he could wear a different one each day.

Jesus, of course, didn't have a watch or any other kind of timepiece. But he knew all about time. At the marriage at Cana, in the early days of his ministry, he told his mother, ***My hour has not yet come. John 2.4.*** When his teaching astonished the religious leaders in Jerusalem, their attempt to arrest him failed, ***because his hour had not yet come John 7.30.*** Again ***while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, no one arrested him, because his hour had not come. John 8.20.***

But, in today's Gospel, Jesus announces the 'hour' *has* now come, ***“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified “*** How Jesus knew this can be found in two incidents, one of which precedes today's Gospel passage.

In the previous chapter, the raising of Lazarus had brought so many people to believe in Jesus that many Pharisees and other leaders of the Jewish community felt they had no alternative: ***So from that day on they planned to put him to death. John 11.53.*** In fact the reaction to the miracle of Lazarus was so great the authorities also plotted the death of Lazarus as well. *John 12.10-11.*



The second incident is seen in the opening of our Gospel passage: the arrival of the Greeks wishing to see Jesus. But what had they to do with Jesus's "hour"? How did they fit into the story? They were probably Greeks who had converted to Judaism as they had come to Jerusalem for the Passover. They approached Philip, who told Andrew, and they both **went and told Jesus John 12.22**. End of story. Despite this elaborate build up, we're never told whether they actually met Jesus, or came to any kind of faith in him. But their arrival emphasises the importance of the verse that precedes today's reading: **The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing . Look the world has gone after him!'** John 12.19.

The arrival of **the world** in the persons of the Greeks indicates that Jesus's 'hour' has come, his death is imminent. At the end of the reading Jesus says, **'Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world is driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people** (some ancient texts read "all things") **to myself. He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.**

Jesus was well aware of the time: he knew his 'hour' had come. And today our 'hour' has come as we move to the crucial part of our Lenten observance. Today is Passion Sunday when we go with Jesus to his 'hour'. Through Lent we have perhaps been focused on ourselves and our penitential life, but now we turn to Jesus and his Passion leading to the Cross. This is reflected in the seasonal aspects of our worship. The Invitation to Confession, Gospel Acclamation, specific Intercessions, Introduction to the Peace, Extended Preface in the Eucharistic Prayer and the words of the Blessing all now focus on the crucified Christ. And so should this be our focus as Lent now moves to its close and climax.

Passiontide calls us to go with Jesus, in his 'hour', through his suffering, death and resurrection. We are not just recalling and commemorating a long past historic event. Rather we seek to identify ourselves with the events of Christ's Passion. We do this in our worship, and this week in our Lent Study Group we shall go with Jesus to Jerusalem, and then in Holy Week reflect on all that happened leading up to the Cross. Next Sunday's service will see the full story in the long reading the Passion, this year from St Mark's Gospel.

Through his life death and resurrection Jesus changed and renewed humanity's relationship with God as foreseen in today's Old Testament reading from Jeremiah: **The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah . . . I will put my law within**

***them, and write on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they will be my people . . . for I will forgive their iniquities, and remember their sin no more. Jeremiah 31.31,33 & 34.***

As Jesus comes to and goes through his 'hour' so it should be a life changing hour for us. Each year as we move through this 'hour', we should be moving on in our life with God. As we grow older so much changes in our lives, both physically, emotionally and spiritually. Our relationship with God is not something static. Our faith may be the foundation of our life and the way we try to live, but it should be ever-changing as with the rest of our lives. People often lose their faith because it fails to move on with their lives. It remains embedded in the faith they grew up in or when they came to faith through a conversion experience. For some people, as life moves on, their relationship with God gets left behind and God and his Church become an irrelevance.

Going with Christ through the 'hour' of his passion and death every year, and asking what this means for us at *this* stage in our lives, can help us to rise with the Risen Lord to a renewed life on Easter Day. We too can be resurrected in our relationship with God.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent – 17<sup>th</sup> March 2024**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

One of the striking things about the book we have been studying in our Lent groups this year, Bishop Tom Wright's *Lent and Easter for Everyone*, is how it charts the gradually tightening noose around Jesus as he travels through Galilee and Judea, incurring the jealousy and fear, and finally the anger, of the religious and political authorities. Last week we saw how the Pharisees, guardians of the religious law, were propelled into an unlikely alliance with the henchmen of Herod Antipas, the puppet ruler of Galilee appointed by imperial Rome – people to whom the Pharisees would not normally have given the time of day. They all felt threatened by Jesus.

The raising of Lazarus in the previous chapter of John's Gospel increased Jesus's fame and following, with the result that the religious leaders were now actively plotting to put him to death. Just before our Gospel reading begins, the Pharisees say to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!' (John 12.19) It's at this point that we are told some 'Greeks' wished to see Jesus. They may have been Greeks who had converted to Judaism, in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Or it may just have been a generic word for 'gentile'. Either way, their request marks a turning point in John's Gospel.

People sometimes divide this Gospel into two: the Book of Signs, in which Jesus performs seven 'signs' or miracles, and the Book of Glory, charting the way to the Cross. The conversation about 'the Greeks' marks the beginning of the second.

The Greeks' request –in the King James translation of the Bible, 'Sir, we would see Jesus' – was often carved around the inside of pulpits. A reminder to clergy that the point of their preaching was to make Jesus present, conveying to people something of his passion and compassion, his unconditional welcome to those on the margins, the generous and open-hearted way he lived, the way he faced outward, always meeting the needs of others, his challenge to small-minded religiosity, his healing presence and the miraculous effect he had on situations, the deep connection he felt with the one he trusted as his heavenly Father, the strength and intensity of his praying, his radical message of love and willingness to risk all for it, his courage in embracing suffering and death on the cross, somehow so absorbing and transforming the evil that had put him there that death itself could not contain him, so that the story ends not in defeat and tragedy but in unexpected joy, abundant new life with God, now and for ever. 'Sir, we would see Jesus.'

The moment of the Greeks' request is an appropriate reading for Passion Sunday, this day on which our focus turns from the wilderness journey of Lent to the events of Holy Week in Jerusalem. The conversation about the Greeks' request comes the day after Jesus's triumphal entry into the city. Yet how quickly the mood is turning. Jesus realises that, as the Pharisees have noted, 'the world has gone after him'. The words Jesus now uses are: 'the hour has come'. Throughout John's Gospel the phrase has been used as a negative: at

the wedding of Cana, when his mother urges him to perform the first of his 'signs', he says 'my hour has not yet come'. The first attempt by the religious leaders to arrest him in Jerusalem failed because 'his hour had not yet come'. But now it has.

The point for us, as for 'the Greeks', is this: if we really ask to 'see Jesus', the thing we will be shown, the thing that defines him more than anything else, is the power of sacrificial love. His 'glory' (a word which also means revelation) will turn out to be the cross. The image Jesus uses at this point is an agricultural one, as so often in his teaching in rural Galilee. Earlier he had offered them the image of the sower sowing seed. Now, as he faces death, he reflects on a seed dying in order to generate new life. It is only if the grain dies and is planted that it yields 'much fruit'.

One ear of wheat might contain forty seeds. If each grain is sown individually, the following year they may produce sixteen hundred seeds, in the year after that sixty-four thousand, and in the year after that over two and a half million. But none of that would be possible without the first one. There is a sense of violence within the image, too - it is only if you crush an ear of wheat that its individual seeds fall to the ground.

There are many examples of those who have – voluntarily or not – borne fruit through their deaths. It happens in wartime especially. The Polish priest Maximilian Kolbe, offering to be executed at Auschwitz in place of a prisoner who had a wife and children. But it also happens in peace time. The gendarme Arnaud Beltrame, who had recently been baptised, offering to take the place of a woman held hostage in a supermarket in Carcassonne in 2018.

Most of us will not find our faith tested like Kolbe and Beltrame. But in smaller ways it will be. Our faith sometimes asks of us, 'what are you prepared to give up for this?' Over the next two weeks we will reflect again on the '*kenosis*' of Jesus which St Paul wrote about, the self-emptying even to the point of death on the cross.

Our engagement with the Passion story is not just historical. It's about noting and responding to suffering everywhere. It's about Gaza, Ukraine, the streets of Marseille, the people I don't know and the people I do. What can I do to help that I am not doing? How does this outrage that happened two thousand years ago affect my responses now? There's something about the Cross that propels Christians to action still, two thousand years on.

I once met a man who as a youth had been in a concentration camp, where there was a perimeter fence facing onto farmland. One day he was standing near the fence, malnourished, shivering in the cold. A man working in the fields walked towards him and threw across the fence a potato that he had just dug. The prisoner caught it and looked at him in gratitude. The potato thrower signed himself with the cross. Later in life the prisoner became a priest. He attributed it to that moment. A seed, bearing fruit.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon – Maundy Thursday – 28<sup>th</sup> March 2024**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Assistant Chaplain*

The hour has come.

Jesus kneels before each disciple. One by one, the water of his love washes over their feet. No one is left out. Judas, who will betray him. Peter, who will deny ever having known him. Thomas, who will seek evidence of Christ's Resurrection. Those who have disputed who is the greatest among them. Those who will remain silent. All are washed. All are loved.

"Do you understand what I have done to you?" asks Jesus.

At first glance, the answer to the question seems clear. The disciples surely know what Jesus has done: he has washed their feet. Yet, like Peter, they might have felt uneasy. This has challenged their cultural protocol: it was customary for a servant to wash the guests' feet upon entering the house, a gesture of hospitality relegated to the lowest rank. How could their Teacher and Lord stoop to such a humble task?

Christ's words are precious and rich, but tonight, his gestures also have their eloquence. "Do you understand what I have done to you?" he asks. With the towel and basin in hand, Jesus reshapes his disciples' perception of power and authority. He turns the realities of their world upside down. He allows God's love to flow freely. He inaugurates the pivotal role of humble, selfless love and service in the communities that will gather around his name after his crucifixion and resurrection.

But tonight, Christ holds before us also the choice of vulnerability and love. It is a choice that cuts to the core of our being, more challenging and real than many of us are comfortable with. "You will never wash my feet," Peter protests,

recoiling from the vulnerability of having his feet touched and washed by Christ. He feels exposed, he feels uncertain. He is reluctant to confront the hidden parts of himself. Just like Peter, we may have parts of our lives that we have exiled; memories we'd rather not acknowledge, afraid as we are to confront our own helplessness and vulnerability amidst life's chaos.

Yet there can be no appropriation of Christ's life, without risking openness, truthfulness, and vulnerability, without revealing ourselves both at our best and at our worst, in the image of the crucified Lord. By daring to allow Christ to serve us, we begin our transformation into his likeness. "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me," Christ declares. We are to remove our shoes and socks, place our feet, our life, our vulnerable self into the hands of Christ – and be washed. This choice extends beyond this evening's ritual; it's a daily commitment, not confined to the liturgy but enacted in the world. Once cleansed, we are prepared to hear Christ's new commandment: "Love one another." Just one commandment. One simple, straightforward commandment, Jesus' deepest desire for his followers.

Can we truly be commanded to love? Does love adhere to decrees? Jesus doesn't merely instruct us to feign love. Instead, he says, "Love as I have loved you." Authentic, sincere, generous love - becoming vulnerable to the world's pain, loving not some, but all. That is the choice before us. A hard and costly choice. Is Jesus asking for the impossible? Perhaps.

Yet, following the commandment, there comes a promise, or perhaps an incentive, or even a warning: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Love thus become the litmus test of our witness in the world. It is through our love for one another that the world knows our identity and our allegiance. Our love is the tangible manifestation of Jesus Christ in the world. It's through our love that we "become a place where God happens for someone else," says Rowan Williams. Just imagine what the world could look like if we cultivated this "impossible" love - God's gift to a broken world.

Many view Jesus merely as a role model, and then despair when they fall short of his 'high standards'. But Jesus' love is not merely an example to emulate. It is the source from which our love flows. It is the origin and sustenance of our love, where it finds its depth and renewal. Jesus doesn't command us to exhaust ourselves by trying to conjure up love from our own limited and easily drained reservoirs. Instead, he invites us to abide in his boundless love – the most



abundant and inexhaustible source of all. The love we could give the world is not our own. It is God's, and God, the source, knows no bounds, no end.

Tonight, we enter the three sacred days that lead us to the core of our faith - to the words and actions of Jesus, which not only inspire us, but also give shape to our lives. We will be shaped and moulded by our service of the world, our love for one another, our communion with Christ's death and resurrection in the Eucharist.

The hour has come. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." The hour has come. The hour the world has been waiting for. Now begins the great mystery of everlasting life. And this is the very journey that Jesus Christ begins tonight.

Amen.

## ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

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

Sermon – Easter Vigil – 30<sup>th</sup> March 2024

#### All Saints' Marseille

*Christine Portman, Reader*

This night, Christian communities all around the world are gathering in darkness, a darkness that represents all that we have been reflecting upon since Good Friday. In that darkness we read the scriptures to prepare us to celebrate the glorious light of Easter Day. We hear the story of the goodness of God's creation and the account of the rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt. We listen to prophecy which tells of God's plan to save us from the power of sin and death. And there, into that darkness, a fire is lit. Tonight, those flames are being shared until the light fills the spaces where we worship, in homes and churches worldwide. A song of exultation is sung, proclaiming Christ as the true light of the world.

But before we can really experience the joy of life in Christ, we have had to travel with him through dark days, to witness our Saviour's agony and to face, in our mind's eye, the brutal reality of his broken body lying lifeless in the tomb. These days of waiting have been good, just as Good Friday is *good*. The temptation may be to race ahead like children desperate for their Easter eggs. But our faith tells us that there's no short-cut to the joyful celebration of Easter. On Holy Saturday in particular, we're called to face full-on something we rarely want to contemplate. In his tomb, Jesus lay dead, in exactly the way each of us will be dead. Breathing stops, and in an instant, life as we know it is gone. The body grows cold and nothing remains but the shell that once held life.

Death is our ultimate fear. Holy Saturday has been a day to face our own mortality. It is very real and its approach holds great power in our lives. And it's what drives so much human lust and greed, so much denial and arrogance, so much silly clinging to power and hectic and anxiety-driven activity. Yet it is the one, inevitable reality we all will face – and the Good News of Easter Day has no real power in our lives *unless* we face the reality of death. As Pope Francis has written in a Lenten reflection: *The Resurrection of Jesus is not the happy ending*

*to a nice story, it is not the happy end of a film; rather it is God the Father's intervention where human hope is shattered. We have to contemplate Jesus' body, there in that tomb, to look our own death in the face and understand the life-giving promise of our faith.*

In his letter to the Romans, Saint Paul reminds us:

Brothers and sisters: Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection. *Romans 6.3-11*

When we don't shrink from looking upon the body of Jesus in the tomb, when we contemplate the mystery of our own death, we prepare our hearts to receive the Good News of a new and risen life. We know that tomb will be empty and remain empty forever. We understand the Resurrection as a sign that our lives are being transformed through God's grace. One day, we will all rest in the embrace of Jesus, who has known our death, and who prepares a place for us in everlasting life.

When we walk with Jesus through Holy Week, we can truly celebrate his gift of life, not only tonight and on Easter Day, but throughout our lives. Our faith in the Resurrection brings immense peace and joy, powerful freedom and vitality to our lives. For when we truly believe that death holds no true power over us, we can walk each day in the grace being offered us – grace to follow his example and give our lives away in love.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon – Easter Day – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

It is the day that changes everything. There is a before and an after. The day when evil is seen to have been conquered, sin and failure forgiven and death itself defeated once and for all. Happy Easter.

Yet those first on the scene were bewildered as they tried to understand what was happening. In the uncertainty of the moment, still traumatised from the events of Good Friday, everyone starts running around. Mary Magdalene runs to Peter and the other disciple (usually taken to be John). They then start running, racing each other to get to the tomb first. There's a memorable painting of this scene by Eugène Burnand in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, two men running full pelt in the early morning light. But having got there, the men are stumped. They note that the body of Jesus has gone ... and they go home.

But Mary waits. She is not running now, but standing, in tears. All she had wanted was to grieve in peace. But then, if it were possible, things had got worse, with the discovery that the tomb was empty. 'They have taken away my Lord.' What is going through her mind? Perhaps that the tomb has been robbed, a common occurrence in those times. Or that the authorities who had

been so determined to put Jesus to death have come and taken away even his body. She looks into the darkness. Then she turns and sees another figure standing, 'supposing him to be the gardener'. And it is then that she hears the thing she never thought she would hear again: Jesus saying her name.

Last night at our Easter Vigil we renewed our baptismal vows, the promises by which we once committed ourselves to Christ: I turn to Christ, I repent of my sins, I renounce evil. We renew these promises each year. But the thing that is only done once in our lives is for us to be named at our baptism. 'Mary, Peter, I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.' Even if we change to another Christian denomination, we can only be baptised once. Naming by God runs deep within the scriptures: 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine' (Isaiah 43.1). God calls people by name, sometimes changing the ones they were given at birth – Abram who became Abraham, Sarai who became Sarah, Jacob who became Israel. Jesus does the same – you are Simon, you shall be Peter. 'You are' ... 'you shall be'. Becoming what God would have us be. Attuned to God's eternal creativity, creating and recreating.

When Jesus names people, he sees to the core of them, accepting them, loving them as they are, for all their faults. In one of the most poignant scenes in the lead-up to the crucifixion, Peter denies three times that he even knows Jesus. In Luke's account, it says at that moment: 'The Lord turned and looked at Peter'. In the hours leading up to the crucifixion, the disciples have discovered who they really are. They meant to do better, but they failed, one betraying and the others all deserting him. It's the same with us. In Lent we are encouraged to

spend time examining ourselves and, when we do, we find ourselves hopelessly wanting.

Yet one of the most powerful and moving scenes in the resurrection accounts comes in the next chapter of John's Gospel, when Jesus encounters Peter on the lake shore. He asks Peter three times if he loves him, giving him the opportunity to reverse the three denials. The astonishing thing is that we too are loved by God, not because we deserve it but even though we don't. Not because we are good at following Jesus but even though we aren't.

That's one message of Easter, that nothing can place us beyond the reach of God to cleanse and heal and make whole. All our sins and failures have been washed away, as they were at our baptism, once and for all. So many of us feel burdened by the past - things we have done or not done, things that have been done or not done to us. But Easter promises us something different. New life, a new start. The opportunity to let go of who we are in order to become what we might be. The thing that St Paul, searching for an expression that would do justice to the enormity of it, called a new creation.

Another message of Easter is that it makes us people of hope. It should inform our response to all that we see wrong with the world at the moment. For evil has ultimately been defeated, however daunting these times may feel. Easter is about hope – hope for the world, hope for Ukraine, hope for Gaza, however impossible it seems. The world is still a daunting place, but we may have confidence, through what God has done and still does in Christ, that evil and death do not have the last word, for nothing is beyond the reach of God's saving love.

Dr Martin Luther King wrote this: 'Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but that same Christ will rise up and split history into AD and BC, so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name.' A before and an after. And then he quotes the 19<sup>th</sup> century priest Theodore Parker, in a phrase so loved by President Barack Obama that he had it woven into a rug in the Oval Office: 'The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.'

At the raising of Lazarus, Jesus said: 'I am the resurrection and the life'. The promise of eternal life with God beyond our human death, and life in all its fullness now. It's an amazing claim, but it's why all over Christendom today churches are full of people singing with joy as they hear: 'Alleluia, Christ is risen!' To which we are bold to respond: 'He is risen indeed. Alleluia!'

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent – 17<sup>th</sup> March 2024**

**Eglise du Sacré-Coeur, Oppède**

*Jane Quarmby, Licensed Lay Minister*

Happy Easter!

After the sombre time of Lent when Christians reflect on the events leading up to the barbaric execution of Jesus Christ on the cross, perhaps denying themselves food, or chocolate, or wine, we arrive in what seems like a blaze of sunshine to hope, new life and celebration. Chocolate surrounds us, children enjoy Easter Egg hunts and adults celebrate with a good long lunch of turkey or lamb – or a baby goat here in the south of France.

I have always found it difficult to think about the final hours of Jesus's mortal life. I am not squeamish normally, but I must admit I recoil from the very visual signs of his torture. To see a large cross made of 2 pieces of rough wood, feel the weight of it and imagine carrying that on shoulders and back torn by a whip, the big handmade nails and the crown of thorns. Garry made a crown of thorns from barbed wire for the service one year and it made me really quite queasy. Still does for that matter!

However, after the darkness and horror, after three days of grief for his followers at the time, and to an extent for us too as we journey through Holy Week, comes the joy of Jesus returning to us. We have already heard how he brought Lazarus back from the dead – and one can only imagine how much of a shock that must have been to those who witnessed a dead man tottering out of a tomb still wrapped up in his bandages. But that was just the opening scene, demonstrating the power of Jesus through God.

Jesus continues to teach us even during the critical time around his death and resurrection. It was two rich and influential men who arranged for the body of Jesus to be taken down from the cross and prepared with as much dignity and care as possible in the short time available before the Sabbath intervened – but



it was a mere woman who was first to discover that he had risen from the dead. Mary Magdalene, whose reputation was trounced for centuries afterwards, who bravely ventured out before sunrise to help perform the sad rites of burial. Women then were not considered in any way of importance or note, who couldn't give evidence in court for example because they weren't deemed credible. But she had the courage to set out in the dark despite the dangers of wild animals and robbers, and it was she who was chosen by God to be the first to discover that the huge rock that had been rolled in front of the tomb had been rolled away, and that the body had gone.

So who was this woman, so important? Mary shared her name with many other women – it was the commonest name in her time, and was differentiated from all the others by her second name of Magdalene – from her place of birth. She has been described at the apostle to the apostles, as the disciple who really understood what Jesus was saying whilst the men didn't. She was wealthy and the leader of the women who bankrolled Jesus and his disciples, following him faithfully. She wasn't a prostitute as became the popular misbelief promulgated from the Easter sermon of Pope Gregory in 591 when he muddled her in with Mary of Bethany and the unnamed sinner who anointed Jesus's feet, but a respectable woman who was to all intents and purposes the female equivalent of Peter amongst the women followers. It wasn't until 1969 that Pope Paul VI put the story straight. But there are still all manner of rumours floating around about her.

But she stood at the Cross and was there with his mother and other women when he died, and when he was lifted down. His male apostles dared not be there. I can't imagine the grief and horror those women went through, seeing their loved one die in such a horrific way. But they stayed on despite their own pain, supporting him the only way they could – just by being there.

Mary dashed off to tell Peter and probably John, that someone had robbed the tomb. It wasn't unusual in those days - the linens and spices used for burial would have fetched a good price for a grave robber. Shocked, the two men investigated for themselves, finding everything tidily folded up but no body. They were not the first see Jesus. They went home. Mary hung around, crying, outside the tomb, and whilst she might not have understood what was going on she was given the privilege of being the very first witness to see Jesus after he had risen from death. It was much later on in the day that he appeared to his

disciples, meeting together behind closed doors, nervous of what the religious leaders would do to them in their turn.

Now if the rising of Lazarus had caused a fuss, the rising of Jesus shortly afterwards was guaranteed to cause even more trouble. Anyone who claimed that Jesus wasn't dead, or really was God's chosen one and back from the dead was going to be marked out for ridicule at best and attack at worst. The religious leaders who had incited the crowd to bay for blood a few days earlier were backed into a corner. If they admitted Jesus was indeed the Messiah, then they were admitting they had killed the Son of God. That wouldn't do at all – hence the disciples meeting behind closed doors. So Mary was probably a lot safer in declaring Jesus alive than the male disciples – after all, who would believe a woman? The authorities would and did try and say that the disciples had made it all up – but had that been the case then they wouldn't have used a woman to be the first messenger – it would have undermined the whole story.

Interestingly, the prejudice continued as we see in Paul's letter to the Corinthians where he says "He was buried and was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve." In Acts 10, Peter says "they put him to death by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him to life on the third day. Then God allowed him to appear, not to the general public, but to us whom God had chosen in advance to be his witnesses. We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." No mention of Mary!

But most importantly for us today, Jesus hadn't come back from the dead for a select few people - he had come back for everyone – male, female, child, Jew and non-Jew – all of creation and all of humanity, regardless of nationality, gender, colour, appearance, relationships, differences. His commandment to us was to love one another as he loved us. He had no prejudices, he came for everyone. And he has no problem in using the most unlikely of us to do his work, like he used Mary. Each and every one of us is important to him, and we all have a function, a part to play, in bringing in a new world, a heaven here on earth. Not for nothing do we pray "Lord, thy will be done on earth as in heaven" as part of the Lord's prayer. Jesus came to be with us always. We may not (and I definitely don't) understand the mystery of his death and resurrection, why he had to die such a tortured death, but like Mary, it's enough for us to believe, to cling to his words and his continuing to walk alongside us through life with all its ups and downs, the sunny days and the dark ones. And we really can thank God

for Easter Day and Christ's sacrifice to bring us new life, new hope and a new dawn on our tired, battered old world.

Happy Easter!