

*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

7th April 2024

Reflection

Words from this morning's Collect: grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, that we may always serve you in pureness of living and truth. Faith in Christ's Resurrection has consequences: we know it means turning our backs on old and destructive habits, going about our daily lives in a new way. But we're a week on from the joy of Easter, and have you, each and every day since, *always served our Lord in pureness of living and truth?* I know I certainly haven't! Temptation is always there: it's human nature to put self first, to give in to emotions, to re-run past hurts and dislike others when their behaviour annoys us. When we see horrific events unfolding worldwide we may even experience hatred for those who are causing suffering to others. We can easily forget that in Christ's Resurrection, he calls us to embody his new way of living each and every day of our lives.

I suspect that as we're living 2,000 years after the events, we don't experience the same urgency as those first Christians we heard about in this morning's first reading. In our churches, we give what we feel we can afford, we try to ensure that our chaplaincies and parishes continue as a Christian presence wherever we live. And there are still communities where everything is held in common and income is shared equally for the good of all the members. But let's be honest, those places are few and far between. Although some leave their houses to the Church, how many sell their homes and give the proceeds for the common good?

Just as some people feel guilty about not having enough faith, others feel awkward, even guilty when they compare the state of the Church today with those early heady days as reported in the Acts of the Apostles, but life moves on. Perhaps this has a good deal to do with a changing understanding of the meaning of Christ's Second Coming. In all three Synoptic Gospels Jesus tells his disciples that he will appear again at the catastrophic end of the world. Read through Matthew 24 again and you'll see all these predictions. Many historians and theologians believe that when early Christians heard that *this generation* (in Greek, *genea*) *will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened*, it was largely interpreted as meaning that all Jesus' contemporaries would witness his return.

Yet several decades on, by the time Paul and John were writing, already we see a movement in how Christians were understanding the events of Jesus' life, and especially the meaning of his Passion and Resurrection. We see deep reflection on their significance for humanity as a whole. The letters of John seem designed to strengthen the faith of Christian communities and to explain the meaning of Jesus' death:

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1.5-9)

The Light of the world has passed through the darkness of human death so that we too may walk with him in the light – and we do that by turning our backs on the darkness and dying to sin. The Resurrection is experienced in the new life of those who receive him.

At the start of today's gospel reading, Thomas had not yet experienced that new life. Jesus first appeared to frightened disciples inside a locked room, but Thomas wasn't there. Blessed with a God-given rational mind, he flatly states *Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.* What about you? Put in the same situation, wouldn't you be wondering if the others really had seen him? In Luke's gospel, their reaction to the women coming back from the empty tomb is similar: *these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them.*

Doubt and questioning are entirely natural; belief is difficult and faith exists in the face of doubt. Hebrews 11.1 puts it very clearly: *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* But sometimes we may feel guilty for questioning the grounds of our faith. I recently read a review of a book called *Faith, Hope and Carnage.* It's a series of interviews of the Australian musician, Nick Cave. Following the loss of two of his sons he said: *....my religious temperament, which has always been there, was ignited after Arthur died. there's always been this struggle between religious belief and my rational self's skepticism of that, which I saw as a religious failing on some level. Something*

turned around in me so that I can now see that not as a failing but rather that the whole energy of my creativity was within this struggle. That struggle is perhaps the religious experience itself.

In a sermon, Timothy Warren comments *Doubt can be a wonderful tool that propels us into deeper learning, earnest soul searching, and spiritual revelation. Faith based on absolute certainty leads to fanaticism, but faith tempered with doubt is mature and stable.* Some of the greatest Christian thinkers have experienced lengthy periods of spiritual doubt and drought. The priest and writer Henri Nouwen wrote, *So I am praying while not knowing how to pray. I am resting while feeling restless, at peace while tempted, safe while still anxious, surrounded by a cloud of light while still in darkness, in love while still doubting.*

What Saint Paul calls the *folly* of the Cross can only make sense to believers who know and experience the living Christ in their hearts. And this takes trust that, despite all that may be going on in the turmoil of our lives, God loves us.

In today's gospel, Thomas represents all of us who at any time waver in our faith. Once he recognizes his risen Lord, he has no need to put his hands upon Jesus' wounds, he simply says: *My Lord, and my God.* David tells me that before he took his first Communion, he was taught to say, as the Host was placed into his hands, those simple, yet totally accepting words: *My Lord, and my God.*

For those of us who believe in the Resurrection, when life throws up painful changes the only constant that remains is our faith in God's unending love for us, a deep understanding of his love, still known in our hearts despite present pain. In her Lenten reflections, Diane Houdek writes: *if our faith is only an intellectual exercise, a list of rules and doctrines instead of a personal encounter with the divine, we will miss the way it can truly change our hearts.* In dark times, fresh encounters with the scriptures can help us to rediscover our hope. Today's gospel shows us Thomas's personal transformation from doubt and cynicism to love and acceptance of the risen Christ. Jesus' reply should warm our hearts: *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*

We thank you, Lord, that you have made yourself known to us, that we have experienced the transforming grace of encountering you, and that we know your presence with us now as we worship you, our Lord, and our God.

Amen.

Christine Portman, Reader

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON
Sermon – 3rd Sunday of Easter – 14th April 2024

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

There are three resurrection appearances in St Luke's Gospel. The first is on Easter morning, when the women who have come with Jesus from Galilee arrive at the tomb and find it empty. They see a vision of two men in dazzling clothes who tell them Jesus is risen. They go to tell the other disciples, who do not believe them. Peter goes to look at the empty tomb, then goes home.

The second appearance is on the road to Emmaus, when two disciples are walking away from Jerusalem talking about all that has happened. A stranger draws near to accompany them on the road. They tell him the story, right up to the events of that morning. The stranger reminds them that the prophets had foretold that the Messiah should suffer before entering into his glory. 'Then beginning with Moses and the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.' Their hearts burn within them, they invite the stranger to stay with them and share supper, at which point he takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them. Their eyes are opened and they recognize him in the breaking of the bread. The two disciples immediately return to Jerusalem, where the others are assembled. It is then that our Gospel reading begins – the third resurrection appearance.

At this stage, the disciples are still bewildered at the unfolding of the events. There's a lovely phrase in our reading – 'whilst in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering'. For those who struggle with the whole notion of

resurrection, they are comforting words. Luke gives us permission to find it difficult, at the same time as emphasizing the power of it. In our reading he places emphasis on the solidity of Jesus's resurrected body – 'Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see...' He asks them for something to eat and they give him a piece of broiled fish, which he eats in their presence.

You could preach a whole sermon about that fish. For no words in the resurrection stories are there by accident. A fish was the symbol of Christ in the early church. The Greek word for fish was *ichthys*, its letters spelling the words 'Jesus Christ the Son of God our Saviour'. It's a symbol that has stuck - you see it today on bumper stickers.

There's another level of meaning, which occurs three times in the Bible. The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand involved Jesus taking five loaves of bread and two fish. In Luke's resurrection accounts, the risen Christ becomes known first in the breaking of bread on the Emmaus Road, and later that evening in Jerusalem in the eating of the fish. Bread and fish are also the menu of the breakfast given by Jesus to the astonished apostles on the lake shore in John's Gospel. The feeding of the five thousand, seen in this light, becomes a foretaste of resurrection, the heavenly banquet.

The resurrection appearances in Luke also tell us that the risen Christ is to be found in word and sacrament – in the scriptures and the breaking of the bread. It's how we meet him still.

I heard a conversation with a theologian this week, who suggested that today's Gospel reading, whilst an excellent summary of resurrection teaching, is somehow lacking in drama. I suspect what's missing is any dialogue from the disciples with which we might identify. There is dialogue in the story of the road to Emmaus (captured vividly in Caravaggio's painting *Supper at Emmaus* in the

National Gallery in London). There is dialogue in Mary Magdalene's recognition in the garden when Jesus calls her by name. And there is dialogue in Thomas's protest that he will not believe until he can see, followed by his affirmation 'My Lord and my God!'. The theologian pointed out that the question the Easter narratives ask, both of the disciples and of us – and of those who do not come to church or trouble themselves with the Christian story – is: 'so what?' What difference does Easter make?

For Luke, the answer lies in the Acts of the Apostles (of which he was also the author), telling the story of the first followers of Christ in establishing the Church. But the 'so what?' question is one we all do well to reflect on during these weeks.

If I had to provide an answer to the question in three minutes, I think it would be something like this. I believe that it is granted us to see, in the mystery of the creation and the mystery that is other people and ourselves, glimpses of the unimaginable power of the Creator of all. If we move beyond the mystery of when, where and how the resurrection happened, if we reflect instead on what St Paul referred to as 'the power of [Christ's] risen life', we become aware that there is no limit to God's power to create and to redeem, to recreate and to affirm. For love involves affirming the one who is loved. God is love, and loves us beyond our imagining. Not even death can defeat God's purposes. As one writer has put it, 'He does not offer the miraculous gift of life only to snatch it back again. ... He doesn't reveal himself in Jesus to prove what we already know – that life is unjust and death is cruel and sometimes violent. He comes to affirm that what he creates will not in the end be destroyed.'¹

To be a Christian is to trust that God is able to recreate, to raise up, humanity in a new way that is unimaginable to us for now; that in Christ we are called into a

¹ Michael Mayne, *To Trust and to Love* (2010).

relationship with God that not only goes to the depths of our being but also extends beyond our death. The reality of the Easter experience now is the same as it has always been. In Christ crucified and risen, God invites us to rethink who we are and what our destiny will be. We stand with one foot in time and one foot in eternity, as we live in God and God lives in us, setting us free from the prisons of our own making and raising us up to new life, to live as part of the new creation inaugurated on the first Easter Day. That is what we celebrate, today and every day. It does make a difference.

Amen.



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
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21st April 2024
Fourth Sunday of Easter*

Reflection

Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday, following our Gospel Reading where Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd. Shepherds crop up 24 times in the Bible, in both the Old Testament and the New. In the early days when the people were nomadic, living in tents and constantly on the move, they were all shepherds. Sheep and people were interdependent, the sheep providing wool for clothing and fabrics, milk, cheese, and meat; and in their turn dependent upon the people to provide food, water, shelter and protection. Over the centuries as people settled and became farmers, shepherds were still vital as were their flocks of goats and sheep. In the Middle Ages fortunes were made from wool and in England the enormous churches built on the woolpack still survive today in the Cotswolds and East Anglia. Abraham, David, Abel, Moses, were all shepherds of sheep before they became shepherds of people.

Everyone in Jesus' time and before, would have been very familiar with what a shepherd did. Not so nowadays when for many in the western world they only know sheep from programmes on TV, or as a pack of indeterminate meat wrapped in plastic in the supermarket. As Margaret Feinberg writes in her book *Scouting the Divine – Searching for God in Wine, Wool and Wild Honey*: "What does it mean to know that Jesus is the Good Shepherd when the only place you've encountered sheep is in the petting zoo?"

It's a good question and it's all too easy to take for granted that people in church do know what a Good Shepherd is – otherwise how can you see Jesus in that role, or even make head or tail of a lot of the Bible?

We still have working shepherds today and things haven't changed much from David's day in terms of the job. The shepherd is responsible for protecting the sheep from thieves, predators like wolves – farmers all around us are losing sheep to the re-introduced wolves - ensuring they have the right food and clean water to drink, moving them onto clean pasture to limit infection, healing them when they are sick, shearing them to keep them comfortable and disease free, and keeping them together and out of harm's way. Sheep will naturally wander off in search of the next green grass (as do people). Lambing season is busy, helping struggling ewes to deliver their lambs. Sheep don't respond well to being driven, but will happily trot along behind their trusted shepherd, following the sound of his (or her) voice. I think it was Tim Teusink who sent me a great cartoon of sheep having a party. They were all standing around wondering what to do until finally the sheepdog arrives with a pack of beer under its arm, when one sheep says to the rest: "Oh thank goodness, the sheepdog's arrived – now the party will get going!" They do need organising.

Being a shepherd isn't all fluffy white lambs skipping around green fields in the sunshine. Despite being waterproof sheep have an unerring instinct to get into trouble and given half a chance, to die. Their waterproof wool is due to a rich content of lanolin which in damp or hot weather is actually stinky - as are their carers. If they don't have their lambs indoors I can guarantee they will wait until the wettest coldest night to produce in the corner of the field furthest away from their nice cosy barn. They need steering away from trouble and their shepherd needs to be with them in all weathers, rain or shine, snow and hail. A good shepherd is protective, attentive, observant, will do all they can to protect their flock. They have a strong bond with their sheep and will protect them at risk to their own lives. Even I have been reckless enough to beat off two curious cows from playing ball with a new born lamb, armed with a yard broom. It's not an easy, comfortable, 9 to 5 job, it's uncomfortable, smelly, muddy and heartbreaking at times. It's also joyous when your sheep run up to you and give you a big cheesy grin. (Yes they do grin.)

So why does Jesus see himself as a shepherd? And us as sheep? In Mark chapter 6 verse 34 we read "Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat, and he had compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd." In John's Gospel today Jesus says "I know my sheep, and they know me" and goes on to say he will sacrifice his life for his sheep. He will collect all his sheep that are scattered and they will listen to his voice. They will follow his voice.

Why is this image so strong throughout the Bible?

If we are Jesus's sheep – does that mean we are hard work, get ourselves into trouble, wander off and get lost, need to be cared for, loved, protected, get muddled and make wrong

choices, are at risk from predators? I'd say we are. We too aren't always fragrant, skipping, happy, healthy creatures. Our predators may not be wolves but we have all too many human predators, intent on harming us, stealing from us, hurting us, killing us, wanting to dictate our lives and control us. We too need shelter, healing, love and care. We need help to point us towards making the right choices, to lead us in the right direction which gives us a fuller, richer life. We need, more than ever, the Good Shepherd to lead us away from war, aggression, exploitation, selfishness, greed, indifference to the suffering of others. There are all too many bad shepherds, keen to lead us astray.

We need to listen to his voice and come to him, bringing our friends, families and neighbours with us into one flock, where each one shares resources so that none go hungry or thirsty, or lacks medical aid, where each one puts others first, and cares for the beautiful creation in which we live. Jesus didn't spend his time in luxurious surroundings, surrounded by the wealthy, the clever, the beautiful people of the day. He spent his time with the people at the bottom of the heap – the poor, the sick, the despised people like tax collectors, the smelly, homeless, uneducated, sick, ugly folk. He knew what human life was like in all its richness and its sadness, it's sometimes brutal heart breaking reality.

Jesus doesn't drive us – he calls us to follow him. He cared for us so much that he gave his life to protect us. He went on ahead of his flock to show us the way, to give us new life. He didn't die for us to carry on following the wrong voices, getting lost and making the wrong decisions in our life, but to listen to him. To trust him to lead us to our own green pastures where we are safe and loved. Jesus has never forced us to follow him; in the same way that sheep will very quickly learn which of the all the voices they hear is the one of their shepherd, and trust in that voice and trot along behind, we need to recognise the voice of our shepherd and follow him.

If sheep are clever enough to know who their Good Shepherd is and recognise his voice, surely we humans should be?

Jane Quarmby, Licensed Lay Minister

*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
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and the Luberon*

**Sermon - Père Laurent Notareschi, Curé, Paroisses Ste Anne et St François-Xavier
April 28th 2024**

Dear brothers and sisters, first of all I would like to thank you for your welcome to your community. I am very happy to continue to cultivate the bonds of friendship that unite us, thanks to Christ our Lord, in the love of the Father and the union of the Holy Spirit.

In order to reflect with you on the readings set for this 5th Sunday of Easter, I have particularly looked at the first reading and the Gospel.

What Luke describes in this passage from the Acts of the Apostles is very touching. How the apostle Philip is placed in the path of this eunuch who is interested in faith but lacks the codes to understand the passage that he is reading from the prophet Isaiah.

There is a double Providence at work here.

If we look at it from the eunuch's side, we see all the tenderness of a God who wishes to respond to his fledgling faith by sending Philip to help him understand. To accompany him not just on the road on which his vehicle is travelling, but on his journey of faith. In passing, we can note the importance of spiritual accompaniment as we have developed it in our church traditions.

The missional agent here is the Holy Spirit; it is He who, in an astonishing way, places Philip in the path of the eunuch. It is certainly He who inclines the eunuch inwardly to hear and understand the apostle's teaching. It is also He who offers this man who is searching an elder in the faith. And we may give thanks to God for all the times he has placed men and women in our paths to guide us, build us up and support us in the faith.

If we look at it from Philip's side, the eunuch is also a wonderful Providence of the Lord. Even today, in our ministry, the Spirit continues to place people in our path so that we can help them understand that the Lord loves them and has already begun his work of salvation in their hearts. As you may know, requests for adult baptism have almost doubled in France. These catechumens have not necessarily followed the paths marked out by our churches, but the Spirit of the Lord, always at work, places them in our path, putting to the test our capacity to welcome and accompany them. What gifts the Lord offers us in each of these new brothers and sisters to love! Let us give thanks to Him for these men and women who are searching, whom He invites us to accompany.

Let us give thanks to God, because in our lives, we are drawn into this double providential movement; one moment we are the one being accompanied, the next we are the one doing the accompanying. One moment we are the eunuch, the next the apostle Philip. One moment we receive, the next we give, and it is in this double movement that our fruitfulness as human beings and as believers is realised.

This beautiful passage from John's Gospel is all about bearing fruit, and therefore fruitfulness. In the teaching of Jesus, as the evangelist presents it to us, the Lord does everything he can to help us in this dynamic: "every branch that bears fruit, he prunes so that it bears more fruit", "the one who abides in me and in whom I abide, bears much fruit"...

But there is one unavoidable condition: we must be united to Christ, just as the branch is one with the vine that bears it. Jesus tells us clearly, in case the image is not sufficiently vivid: "without me you can do nothing".

In this day and age, we may not like to hear this. Our pride would lead us to think that we are self-made men, our thirst for freedom would encourage us not to be dependent on anyone, especially God.

But pride has never been a good counsellor, and in the blindness that it inevitably causes, it leads us to become the withered branches that need to be cut off and thrown away in order to restore the vine.

If we start from the principle that we were created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis), that the Lord made us little less than gods (Psalm 8), then there is nothing wrong with accepting the words of Jesus: "without me you can do nothing". Of course, each of us can produce good things and bear good fruit. But if it is the Lord who enables us to bear fruit, how much stronger, more beautiful and more lasting it will be!

Recently, I went to Assisi in Italy. As I reflected before the tomb of St Francis, I thought again of the words of Jesus: "The grain of wheat that falls to the ground, though it dies, bears much fruit". Francis died in 1226, and it's amazing to see how much fruit this man of God continues to bear even today. He who prayed: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace" is still answered in his prayer. It is impressive.

"The glory of my Father is that you bear much fruit". Let us rejoice, brothers and sisters, for in his infinite mercy, the Lord has chosen us all to be vessels of his glory, and by living in this world, he enables us to bear all these good fruits of peace, love, joy, patience, gentleness, reconciliation, humility, trust...

In Galatians 5, Paul tells us that these are the fruits of the Holy Spirit, always Him, the one who is at work in the heart of the eunuch and who urges Philip to accompany him. This

other Advocate that Jesus promises us before ascending to his Father. Today too, and on the feast of Pentecost, may we fully allow him to act in our hearts and in our lives. For if Christ is the Vine and we are the branches, then the sap which makes life flow throughout the vineyard, and which enables fruit to abound, is indeed the Holy Spirit.

Amen.