

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Easter Vigil – 30th 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.