

**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**

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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.