

Evil turned to good

A sermon preached by Revd Canon Dr Simon Jones, Chaplain of Merton College Oxford on the 3rd Sunday of Easter, 18 April 2021

'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead . . . , and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations . . . You are witnesses of these things'. (Luke 24.46-48)

To witness to Christ's death and resurrection is the vocation of all Christian people. The last 10 days have provided an opportunity to reflect on what inspired Prince Philip, for almost a century, to live his life as a witness of these things. For me, one of the most interesting aspects of this is the significance of his mother, Princess Alice of Greece. Her story has been told a number of times in recent days: a great-grand-daughter of Queen Victoria, who was born deaf; who fell in love with Prince Andrew of Greece, married him in 1903 and settled in Athens; the mother of five children who converted to Orthodoxy; whose intense religious experiences led people to believe that she was insane and, in 1930, following a nervous breakdown, to her being admitted to a Swiss asylum; who, after three years, returned to Athens to live in a small apartment, from where, during the years of Nazi occupation, she organised soup kitchens, medical clinics and shelters for orphaned children; who, when the Nazis started deporting Athenian Jews to concentration camps, gave refuge for over a year to her Jewish friend, Rachel Cohen, and her children, at great personal risk to herself; and who, after the war, became a nun and founded her own religious order.

There's much more that can be said about Alice's remarkable life but for me, what's most striking in the light of this morning's readings from Acts and Luke, is the relationship between her Christian faith and her attitude towards the Jews at a time of horrendous persecution. It stands out for me because whereas Jesus's words in Luke's Gospel exhorted her, and exhort us, to be witnesses of Christ's death and resurrection, the Acts passage has led to Christians to do so by blaming the Jews for Christ's death, and to lead the Church towards appalling anti-Semitism. This text is by no means alone in being used in this way but, with the example of Princess Alice in our minds, I want to take a few moments to look at it this morning.

The healing of the crippled man by Peter and John takes places in the post-Pentecost period, immediately after the outpouring of the Spirit fifty days after Christ's resurrection. Having witnessed this miraculous healing, the Jewish crowd are at a complete loss to understand what they have seen. And so Peter responds: 'why do you wonder at this . . . why do you stare at us?' As he begins to explain how what has happened is the direct result of faith in the crucified and risen Jesus, it would appear that he holds the Jews exclusively responsible for the death of God's Messiah: Jesus 'whom *you* handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him . . . *you* rejected the Holy and Righteous One . . . *you* killed the Author of life'. And so he goes on.

But, of course, if we withdraw from the scene for a moment, and think back to our recent observance of Holy Week, then we can be left in no doubt that to interpret Peter's words simplistically as anti-Semitic finger-pointing simply will not do. For it is surely *all* those present at Jesus' trial and crucifixion, including those closest to him, including Peter who three times denied him, who must be seen as bearing some measure of responsibility for the death of Jesus. Jews and Romans, high officials and ordinary people, those who feared the God of Israel and those who did not – all were culpable.

But having said that, at another far more important level, it was not "they" (whoever "they" might be) who killed Jesus, but "we", that is humankind. And once we've accepted that fundamental truth, then the exact role which Jews and Romans played in Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion is, at best, of secondary importance.

So, then, back to Acts. If it is the case that you, they, we, all were responsible for the death of the Son of God, then Peter, having apparently castigated the Jews for their part in it, goes on to say what a good thing that was. That which sinful beings perpetrated has, through the grace and power of God, been transformed into a miracle of life and resurrection: 'You killed the Author of life . . . whom God raised from the dead'. In the topsy-turvy logic of the kingdom of God, those who crucified Jesus were unwittingly working towards the fulfilment of what God had promised: 'In this way', Peter says, 'God fulfilled what he had foretold through the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer'.

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, this is not the only example of evil being turned to good at the hands of God. Right back in the book Genesis, Joseph muses over the failed efforts of his brothers: 'Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good'. And then, just a fortnight ago, the words of the Easter Exultet, sung after the lighting of the Paschal candle, proclaimed Adam's taking of the apple in the Garden of Eden as both happy and necessary: 'O happy fault! O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer'.

So, then, mindful both of the anti-Semitism that all too often has reared its head within the life of the Christian Church, and of the brave Christian witness of Princess Alice, what are we to make of our first reading this morning, as we continue our celebration of Easter? Remembering Peter's words: 'You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us?' let us not fall into the trap of looking for a scapegoat to blame for the death of Christ. For we have a scapegoat, Christ himself, and the sins which are laid upon him are our own.

Rather let us respond to Christ's death as Peter suggests: 'Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out'. This may sound more like a message for Lent than for Easter, but if we are an Easter people, empowered by God's Spirit, then the process of conversion, that cyclical movement from confession of sin, made in response to an acceptance of God's unconditional forgiveness, leading to a renewed expression of faith and service, must be a feature of our Christian lives if we are to have any honesty or integrity in the way we try to share our joy in the risen Christ with others.

This is the example of Christian living we see in the life of Princess Alice – it's not neat or comfortable or safe or predictable; it's not always attractive to others nor rewarding for self; but it's an authentic life lived in relationship with Christ and in the service of his people. It's a life we are called to embody. In Princess Alice it was a life whose influence on the Duke of Edinburgh bore great fruit to the benefit of the Crown, this Kingdom and the Commonwealth, a life which earned Alice the honoured title 'Righteous Among the Nations' at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial in Israel.

For 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead . . . , and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations . . . You are witnesses of these things'. **Amen**