

## What sustains us

A sermon preached by Jonathan Chaffey, Archdeacon of Oxford, on Sunday 26 June 2022  
St Peter's Patronal Festival service. Refs: *Ezekiel 3.22-27, Acts 12.1-10*

By all accounts it's not easy to be a prophet. It certainly wasn't for Ezekiel, given the precarious nature of his personal circumstances and those of his people. He was in exile around 600BC as the Northern Kingdom of Israel had fallen to Assyrians and just before the Southern Kingdom of Judah had succumbed first to the Egyptians and then the Babylonians. They were challenging times, with international upheaval exacerbated by corrupt and immoral leadership within Israel and Judah. Later in his writings we have wonderful passages of divine restoration, of the Holy Spirit breathing life into the valley of dry bones with the promise of a new heart and a new spirit. But early on Ezekiel's mission was to declare that society turned its back on God. He spoke courageously to remind people of the sovereignty of God and to call them back to holiness. What sustained him? Well, it seems he had experienced an extraordinary vision of God in his glory, appearing as a man full of fire and brilliant light – rather like the Son of Man in the Book of Revelation, specifically referring to St John's vision of Jesus. With this came a deep assurance that the hand of God was on him and that God would speak through him.

We then come to Peter not in exile but in prison for his outspoken witness to Jesus. He knew that the promises of Ezekiel had come true: not only restoration from physical exile but the reunion with God through the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. With this came the gift of the Holy Spirit, the breath of God that would enable the followers of Jesus to speak and work in his name. But it must have been hard - here he was, closely guarded in prison, aware that his close friend, James, had already been put to death. So What sustained Peter, what kept him going? Well, he knew the risen Lord – having publicly failed Jesus he had been restored – to the extent that only recently he had openly declared that he could not stop speaking of what he had seen and heard. Like Ezekiel he was assured of his identity and his calling, to be the rock on which the church would be built. Whatever would come his own way, he had confidence that God was in control. Add the fact that the church was praying earnestly and you have very good conditions for a work of grace!

I wonder what sustains you? Both as individuals and as a church community seeking to live out your Christian faith in Wolvercote and Wytham? As individual Christians, how confident are we of our inheritance. There seem to be so many societal needs. We may not be in exile but we have refugees in our own city – hence your excellent Ukraine Welcome at your Friendship Cafe. On top of this we have an ongoing pandemic and an NHS under strain, a cost-of-living crisis which hits those with least most, a loss of confidence in institutions such as parliament, and a society that is unfamiliar with the basic tenets of the Christian story. And of course, there are specific challenges and opportunities within this parish, among them the futures of our young people and new housing developments. It could be enough to keep one awake at night, so I am reassured that Peter was actually able to sleep between his two guards. Both he and Ezekiel knew that God was with them. How confident are we that God is with us, that his glory is within us and around us and that his promises remain true?

We have an ambitious diocesan vision: to be *Christ-like for the sake of God's world: more contemplative, compassionate and courageous*. Our priorities mirror the 5 Marks of Mission that characterise the Anglican Communion: *To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom; To teach, baptise and nurture new believers; To respond to human need by loving service; To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation; To*

*strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.* The last of these Marks has just been added to the Baptism affirmations within our diocese. I am really encouraged to be part of a church that seeks such a holistic and vibrant approach to faith. And having worked a little with your church community during the vacancy before Kate's arrival, I know that you have a deep desire to make these marks real in your community – in your Sunday worship, yes, and in your day-to-day witness and service in the parish and beyond.

It's all ambitious – but is it possible? To be a Christian, as Peter knew, is the most wonderful and lasting gift. Yet the call to speak and work in his name can appear quite daunting. Ezekiel was overwhelmed by the prospect until the *Lord put his hand on his shoulder*. He was a Watchman, called to stand on the city wall, to watch for danger, to read the signs of the times and to call out timely warnings. In my military chaplaincy I sometimes needed to support watchkeepers, who often felt the burden of their responsibility acutely. The image reminds me of an icon from around the seventh century, known as *The Abbot of Mena or Christ and his Friend*. It's a wonderful picture of companionship – the Abbot carrying the scroll of monastic disciplines, Jesus carrying the scriptures, the cross in the background, they have one eye on each other and one on the world. For me the most wonderful aspect is the hand of Jesus on the right shoulder of the Abbot. It could easily be a picture of Jesus with Peter, the Abbot of the Church. Most wonderful of all, the relationship and promises that lie behind it are true for us today: *however you feel, God knows you. Whatever you face, he strengthens you. Wherever he calls, he will go with you.* So, at this Petertide let us ask for God the Holy Spirit to confirm in us his presence, renew us with his call and so strengthen us to live out our faith with understanding and courage.

Amen