

John 21 1-18 (Exd 3:1-12 & Exd 17: 1-7) St M & AA 8.30 & 10am 19/6/22  
*Altered Reading to Trinity 1. Reflection following Diocesan Clergy Conference*



*May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Morning everyone! I'm not sure that everyone will be aware that I have changed the readings for this week from the scheduled lectionary ones. As many of you will be aware last week I went to the Oxford Diocesan Clergy Conference, which was excellent. It was great to have such varied speakers and representatives from link dioceses, discussion groups, prayer, workshop and reading opportunities and worship that covered high Anglo catholic sung liturgy, to prophecy and speaking in tongues! It was deeply moving, spiritual and inclusive, and I would like at this point to thank all those responsible for organizing the conference and to all those who spoke, led sessions and especially those who's thoughts and machinations have led to my reflections today. So the readings I have chosen reflect some of the reading materials, discussions, sermons and lectures that stood out for me during conference.

I don't think it would come as a surprise if I told you that the events of the last two years, the present state of affairs and what the future may or may not hold as a nation and as a church were chief among the talks.

The keynote speech was delivered by Paul Boatang previously the labour MP for Brent South who became the UK's first Black Cabinet Minister in May 2002, when he was appointed as Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Following his departure from the House of Commons, he served as the British High Commissioner to South Africa from March 2005 to May 2009 and became a member of the House of Lords in 2010. He is also a Methodist preacher. To be honest though passionately delivered it was hard listening and depressing. What I say now gives an overview of what he said.... The world is in a crisis of confidence with the frequent

failings of institutions, governments and churches, fuelled by competing ideologies. The cold war may have ended but has been replaced by global market politics, scandal and media manipulations, duplicity, and the toxicity of the World Wide Web. The UN, WHO and IMF have even been under attack as Covid vaccines blocked to those most in need. Even now less than 20% of Africa has had a first vaccine. Globalisation once seen as beneficial has not served the many but the few, that of the global elite. Is there any wonder people are struggling with identity, when it seems that exclusion is often based on the 'other', when the 'Other' changes, depending on the political and social ideologies of the World Wide Web.

Globally 71% of the population are in the places of greatest inequalities and COVID has now pushed 127 million into extreme poverty while there has been an increase of 4.4trillion dollars circulation within the top 1% of the richest.

How does any of this fit with the theology of Christ's death and resurrection so that we may live in the one identity that comes from the reality and bear witness to, that we are all one in Jesus Christ. We have to believe this if we are to have any chance of proclaiming this without fear. With inflation here estimated to reach 10% by the end of the year, conflict is bound to increase. Told you it was depressing but his overview was born of experience and place.

'Are we nearly there yet?' was a group session looking at ministry in and after a pandemic. It too was hard listening. As spoken about at our APCM, all of us but especially the ministry team and churchwardens were aware of the constant changes in rules etc., during covid, but I didn't realise there were in fact 42 changes in rules and legislation, 42! The first death was in March 2021 rising within 8 weeks to 30,000 deaths, this rose within a year to 120,000 deaths.

During this period in time we moved through emotions of disbelief, to fear to numbness. We then moved into what is being called the 'hero stage', applauding the NHS and Key workers who were placing themselves in danger for the care and sake of others, giving the nation and world a focus beyond themselves, a glimmer of hope and light in the darkness. Now with the wonders of vaccines to which we have been in the privileged few to receive, the 'Are we nearly there yet?' phase is

here. The question is what is 'THERE'? For many 'there' is back to where we were pre pandemic. And here lies a problem. A problem which Moses was all too familiar with.

Moses didn't have the best of starts in life, as we know, but despite his background and his mistakes, God still called him. In our first reading Exodus chapter 3 we are told God heard his chosen people's cries and called Moses to lead his people the Israelites back to the Promised Land. God didn't take Moses off somewhere special to declare his calling, God met Moses where he was in the field tending his father-in-law's sheep. I suspect Moses would be a little bored and looking around and that's why he probably noticed the bush burning, and then because nothing much else was happening he noticed that the bush was not being consumed.

The Israelites were not party to this experience and let's face it the times they had had they would need evidence of God being with them. Trust in Moses was strengthened once Pharaoh had released them following the plagues, but faulted once more as approaching the Red Sea they saw the Pharaoh's army in quick pursuit. Trust strengthened once more as they reached by God's grace the other side and saw the army drowned.

But eventually as in chapter 17 our second reading, despite God providing them with manna and the institution of Sabbath to sustain them, the complaining started again. 'Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me."' God instructs Moses to strike the rock at Horeb and water is provided. This constant pressuring of Moses and the testing of God takes a great toll on Moses and is a sign of a community both individual and corporately struggling to process what has happened. When this happens people often go through a state of denial, as denial is a lot less painful for themselves than awareness of the cause of unease. The Israelites wanted a return to the promised land a land of memory and identity just as today as we come out of the covid pandemic many people yearn to be back to how things were pre covid. When things are not how we want them, people look to blame someone, people in leadership either national, local, organisational and yes even in churches as facing what is true in our own lives, being aware, calls us to take responsibility for responding to what we are seeing – which is another

reason that many of us seek to avoid awareness for as long as we can. As Ruth Barton succinctly puts it ' But when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of changing, we are ripe for making a move. The emotions that we feel in response to what we have seen might be volatile during this time, but they serve a good purpose –they give us the energy and resolve to begin preparing to move in a new direction. This however takes time we have to wait upon God, a commodity the modern world never seems to have!

'Richard Rohr calls this waiting place 'liminal space', liminal comes from the Latin word *limina*, which means threshold. Liminal space, the place of waiting, is

*a unique spiritual position where human beings hate to be but where the biblical God is always leading them. It is when you have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else..... It is when you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. If you are not trained in how to anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to entrust and wait, you will run....anything to flee this terrible cloud of unknowing.'*

This was one of the final lessons the disciples had to learn In our Gospel reading we have the disciples still trying to make sense of it all. Jesus' death on the cross, then the resurrection, and Jesus appearing here there and everywhere....what on earth did this all mean for them. What they had witnessed to was beyond what they could ever have dreamed of. Death, resurrection, disbelief as shown by Thomas wanting to see proof that Christ was still with them, just like the Israelites wanting proof via Moses, then hope and joy, their journey had been long hard and costly, and just like the Israelites, they were not the same people that they were before the journey commenced. Yet Jesus was now saying he was leaving them.. clearly the disciples were looking and longing for some end point that they now felt was never coming and couldn't wait any longer. They make the decision to go back fishing, however they catch nothing. *'Jesus said to them "Children you have no fish, have you?" They answered him. "No." He said to them, Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.'" So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.'*

Going back to fishing and how they were before the journey no longer worked. Jesus was teaching them to wait, to wait upon God and trust in him. Jesus then breaks the bread and fish with them as a symbol of both the brokenness of the world and as himself being the liminal space between the old covenant and the new covenant. What follows is Simon Peter's commission to feed God's sheep, echoing the calling of Moses to the Israelites; both of them not the most likely candidates for leadership but God calls whom he calls despite ourselves.

The question of 'are we nearly there yet', remains. Today after all that we have journeyed through over the last two years there is a great sense of being in liminal space, a space between what was and what is to come, on a threshold to which as yet we have no answers. But we do have a way forward in Christ, not back to the old but forward into the new, we just have to wait, be patient have confidence in His leading and be aware of God's workings around us and in us.

Our journey today started with Moses and the burning bush and as Ruth Barton testifies

*'All of us have burning bushes in our lives, places that shimmer with grace, alerting us to the possibility that God is at work doing something that we could not have predicted. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes in her poem;*

*Earth's crammed with heaven  
and every common bush afire with God;  
but only he who sees, takes off his shoes –  
the rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.'*

#### Acknowledgments

1. Paul Boatang, Oxford Clergy Conf..June 2022
2. Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership –Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry -Ruth H Barton IVP Books.
- 3, Are we nearly the yet? Oxford Conference