



St Mark's Church, Reigate

April 2018

Letter from the Vicar, Father Martin Colton

Dear Friends

Do not be afraid

Some years ago we visited the aftermath of a forest fire in California. Some months earlier the blaze had caused extensive damage to the once beautiful landscape and at first glance it looked like everything had been destroyed forever. However, the person who acted as our guide was able to show us some extraordinary signs that all was not lost. On closer inspection we noticed new shoots springing up and I was fascinated to learn about the process of renewal that comes after such a fire. After the heat and devastation and amidst the charred remains, new life almost miraculously appears. The landscape, though different, becomes once again something that is lush, life-giving and beautiful to behold.

My mind returns to that scene as I think about what confronted Christ's disciples during the period between the last supper, the betrayal, arrest and the horrors of Calvary. Their beloved friend and teacher had been betrayed and handed over to the Roman authorities. He suffered a mockery of a trial, was beaten and flogged and finally executed in one of the most brutal and cruel ways ever invented. The desolation must have been total, not to mention the fear that something similar would then happen to them. It seemed to be the end of things with so much wasted potential. Surely, they thought, he was only just getting started? But of course, that death and what followed was really just the beginning, with the destruction and violence of Good Friday giving way to the scene at the empty garden tomb.

In Mark's gospel it is some women who first discover the joyous news. The stone is rolled away and an angel tells them "Do not be afraid. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here." We then read that they were indeed afraid as they walked away, and who can blame them? However, something extraordinary then began to happen. As the disciples and others encountered the risen Jesus, new signs of life began to appear. They begin to spread the good news, to speak of all they had seen and shared with Jesus and the church was born. This new life spread to all the areas of the known world through the bold and unashamed proclamation of the disciples, who themselves had been transformed from a pathetic group of terrified and deserting former followers into the founders of Christendom.

The words "Do not be afraid" appear many, many times in the Bible, in varied contexts. I think all Christians should take them to heart because I believe there is growing hostility to our faith in sections of the media, the public sector, the judiciary and on social media. All too often we fail to speak up and make a stand for the teachings of Christ because we are indeed afraid.

The life changing message of Christ took hold because his friends and followers spoke up, in the face of harsh persecution. Many lost their lives but, undeterred, more and more came to faith and the Jesus revolution began. That revolution is still changing lives today and there are areas of the world where the church is growing at an extraordinary rate. Perhaps we have become too cautious in the West, but there are nonetheless hopeful signs.

A good starting point would be to remember the angel's words at the tomb; "do not be afraid." The message of Easter is one of new life after desolation. It is a message which is unchanged through history. The God who reached out to that eclectic group of first followers in the person of Jesus, is still calling out to us, willing us to stop struggling against Him and to come home. Far from an offensive message, the teachings of Christ are about love, forgiveness, tolerance and peace. There is nothing to be ashamed of and everyone who calls themselves Christians should speak up and pass on the good news. Christ is risen! What is there to be afraid of in light of that?

Happy Easter!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Manton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.