**The Swiss Church in London**

**Sunday service, 1 May 2022**

**Welcome**

“Arise, shine; for your light has come,

and the glory of God has risen upon you.” (Isaiah 60:1)

“Steh auf, werde Licht, denn dein Licht kommt und der Glanz Gottes strahlt über dir auf!“

“Lève-toi, brille, car ta lumière arrive, et la gloire de l'Eternel se lève sur toi.”

Welcome to the Swiss Church in London!

*The glory of God has risen upon you*, what wonderful words to start our gathering today to find a moment of peace and reflection. God calls us to arise and shine with all that we are and all that we bring into this world, with our flaws and our qualities, our past mistakes, and greatest talents.

Sometimes, rise and shine is the opposite of what we feel like doing. Actually, it can be pretty annoying to hear someone say it if we are not in the mood. But today we made it, we rose, and we shine. And sometimes that’s the greatest achievement of the day, a small contribution perhaps, but for each one of you who decided to rise and join our lovely congregation today: without you, the church would be empty and our congregation a bit poorer.

God welcomes us with open arms, no matter what is going on in our lives right now, no matter our faith tradition and our doubts. We are united in the hope that love and peace will prevail.

**Prayer**

Life-affirming God

We are here today ready to fully engage with you and with the weird and mysteriously beautiful universe that you have created.

We are here to forget for a moment the rhythm of the ticking clock, the soundtrack of our earthly life, to enter your reality where time and space have a different meaning.

We are here, ready to open our hearts completely, with our unhealed wounds and unfulfilled dreams, our dearest hopes, and greatest joys.

Be there right beside us, loving God, on the rollercoaster journey of life and embrace us fully with all that we bring to you today.

Amen

**Reading John 21: 14-19**

This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

**Sermon**

Easter is past and we are finding ourselves in this past-Easter time when Jesus, raised from the dead, appears to his followers and they are beginning to make sense of what they are witnessing. It’s a time of confusion, uncertainty, and hope. Something is in the air, but the full impact of the Easter events is not yet fully understood. The interpretation of the Easter events as we can read it in the New Testament has not yet been written down. For now, it’s just the raw experience of the miracle of all miracles.

The most famous Bible passage of this post-Easter time is undoubtedly the walk of Emmaus when Jesus joins two of his disciples on a country walk. He listens to them talking about the death of their friend and their hopelessness, and they do not recognise him at first.

We are however not going to talk about the most famous post-Easter text today, but turning to the Gospel of John instead, the Gospel that always has some surprising treasurers in store, stories that don’t appear in any of the other Gospels.

Towards the very end of the Gospel of John there is a dialogue between Simon Peter and Jesus, the resurrected. Now Peter was one of the very first recruits of the Jesus movement, a young man leaving behind the parental fishing business on the shore of Lake Galilee to follow this young man on his mission to bring the kingdom of God to all people. Simon Peter was around all the way along, faithfully by Jesus’ side as he preached and healed and changed people’s lives. Considering he was such a faithful disciple, the dialogue between Jesus and Simon Peter is rather surprising. Jesus was with a group of his friends, and after breakfast, he began to challenge Simon. “Simon Peter, do you love me more than these?” he said. And then twice more: “Simon Peter, do you love me?” Three times he asks, and every time, Simon Peter reassures Jesus of his love. He his hurt, the situation is heating up. Does Jesus not trust his friend? What is this weird needy behaviour of Jesus all about? It’s not how Jesus is usually portrayed in the Bible.

To understand this passage better, we must find out a bit more about Simon Peter. Simon Peter is the person that we know better as Saint Peter, often depicted in art history as the key holder of the church. He was one of the first leaders of the early Christian community. He is traditionally counted as the first Bishop of Rome, the first Pope, and according to the Christian tradition died by crucifixion. Some of the letters in the New Testament are also attributed to Simon Peter. Without a doubt, Simon Peter, or Saint Peter, is one of the most prominent figures in the circle of Jesus followers, the man on whom the church is built, as the tradition says. A true Saint! An example of a Jesus follower! So why does Jesus challenge him out of all disciples, desperately seeking his approval?

Simon Peter is not all that spotless. The man with the big church keys is also the man who gave up Jesus to the temple guards and betrayed him three times on the evening of his arrest. This is what we read in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 22:

*Peter was following the temple officers at a distance. A servant-girl stared at him and said, “This man also was with Jesus.” But he denied it. A little later someone else said, “You also are one of them.” But Peter said, “I am not!” Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, “Surely this man also was with him.” But Peter said, “I do not know what you are talking about!” At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. Jesus turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.*

It seems unfair, even hypocritical, that the man who betrayed Jesus three times on the night of his arrest later becomes the church’s famous founding figure. Leading figures are expected to follow high moral standards. That’s what we expect from people leading our countries, our churches, and economical institutions. Yet leaders upholding high ethical standards are a rare species, because power can rarely be achieved without playing the game of intrigue and betrayal. We don’t even have to look very far for an example, our current Prime Minister makes for a brilliant example of low moral standards. We also know from our own experience that when put in a position of leadership we will still bring with us our flaws and sometimes fail the standards expected from us.

Despite of the betrayal, Jesus calls Simon Peter into discipleship. He asks to keep and feed his sheep. It’s easy to see how this passage can be misused to cling on to power. If Jesus calls Peter into discipleship, we are fine to carry on with our failures too! In our society, which is shaped by patriarchy, capitalism, and white privilege, the Bible has been misinterpreted and twisted in this sense for centuries to allow the powerful to hold on to their privilege and pass it down the ranks regardless of their moral standards. Today, we stand at a different point, or so I hope, insofar that we can look at our traditions more critically and ask for accountability. Not every behaviour can be justified in a leadership position, even if some people do believe exactly that.

But this is different from the core message of this text. I don’t think Jesus anticipated how his actions and words would be twisted and misinterpreted later. The core message is that we are seen as who we are, with all our flaws and immoral decisions, human, with the potential to change, always given a second chance, and with God’s forgiveness in abundance. I think for our lives this remains a hugely important message. We must forgive ourselves and each other for the harm that we have caused to heal and become whole, and if we are unable to grant forgiveness, believe in God’s forgiving power. The Christian principle of forgiveness should not be mistaken for a cheap excuse to carry on with our daily business. Forgiveness is a profound healing process for body and soul.

There is a second part to the dialogue between Simon Peter and Jesus. Jesus says: *“When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”*

At first, this passage seems to refer to Peter’s crucifixion that he will one day endure, being put in chains, in prison and then onto the cross. But it also entails a question to us: What or who is it that leads you? Are you following your own interests, only going where you want to go? Or do you take the lead from a higher, bigger dimension – the universe, the heartbeat of the creation, the path of love, Almighty God, Jesus Christ? No matter what we call this dimension, if we are being led by something bigger, higher, we will go to places that are less convenient for us in the short term. We will give up actions and patterns that are convenient for us but harm the planet and our relationships, for instance driving short distances in a car or buying vegetables in plastic wrappings. We will be willing to give up power and privilege to share it with others, which may lead to less influence, perhaps less money. It’s a challenging path and most of us struggle. I certainly do. I like it convenient. But being led by this bigger dimension means that we must give something up for the sake of others, for the sake of God’s creation.

Simon Peter went the easier route on the night of the betrayal. He flirted with power and turned his back on Jesus. Still, Peter became Saint Peter, the keyholder and founder of the church where we are still coming together today to seek God’s presence. Does Peter deserve to be the founding father of the church with his history of betrayal? I let you be the judge of that.

May your life’s journey lead you to places where you want to go, and places where you don’t want to go for the sake of the greater good, and may you feel the heartbeat of God’s creation wherever you walk.

Amen

**Prayers of Intercession**

God become human,

You endured betrayal from one close to you

who had shared your food

and enjoyed your company and confidence.

Heal the hurts of abused trust that injure us

when those whom we called friends have betrayed intimacy.

We thank you for those who help us rediscover how to trust again

and open our guard to love that sets us free.

*Kyrie Eleison*

God of justice and peace,

we thank you for the freedoms we enjoy

to choose our leaders

and shape the course of our common life.

Give us the wisdom to to share our privilege with others

and to use the power we share for the good of all,

the relief of those in need,

and the furtherance of wholeness and truth.

*Kyrie Eleison*

We pray for the members of our congregation and wider network

who have recently lost someone,

for those undergoing surgery and recovering from illness,

our friends too frail or immobile to join us at the church,

and those taking care of relatives at home.

We pray for those unsure about their future,

for our friends dealing with disappointment, loneliness, and mental health issues.

Send your holy spirit to unite us all in thoughts and prayers.

Amen

**Lord’s Prayer / Unser Vater**

**Blessing**

God bless you and keep you; God make her face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; God lift up her countenance upon you and give you peace.

Que le Seigneur te bénisse et te garde! Que le Seigneur fasse briller sur toi son visage, qu’il se penche vers toi! Que le Seigneur tourne vers toi son visage, qu’il t’apporte la paix!

Gott segne dich und behüte dich; Gott lasse das Angesicht leuchten über dir und sei dir gnädig; Gott hebe sein Angesicht über dich und gebe dir Frieden.