Easter 4 St Andrews, St Andrews

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I’ve had a rather extraordinary week – most of it spent at the Anglican Centre in Rome which is a sort of Anglican Embassy to the Vatican. It’s a remarkable world – the administrative centre for a church of 1.4 billion Catholics. The Anglican Communion is all over the place in its relationships. The Vatican presents a very different picture – smooth, ordered, measured. The Director explains to me that the Vatican sees Anglican Primates as equivalent in rank to their Cardinals. So I sat in gold chairs with red cushions for a conversation with Archbishop Paul Gallagher who is in effect the Foreign Minister – another meeting to discuss ecumenism with the person who manages all that. But of course the highlight was to be received by Pope Francis. Into St Peter’s Square with 30-40,000 people and sitting on a platform near the Pope’s seat. He arrives in a pope-mobile – no bullet-proof glass although he is an obvious target. He moves around the crowd, kissing babies, touching and praying for sick people. It’s extraordinary – unruly and passionate and deeply compassionate.

And then the ceremonial begins. It’s ordered and disciplined and very nuanced. Others will go up the steps to meet the Pope but he will come down to greet me and other ecumenical guests. And then the surprise as Alison and our daughter Anna were also beckoned forward to be greeted by him with warmth and humanity. And then the diplomatic interpretation of this – perhaps a nod to the recent publication of his Exhortation Amoris Laetitia on the family and relationships – or maybe a sign of the strength of Anglican-Roman Catholic relationships

My mind and heart are full of all that and I ponder today’s readings against that background.

Thinking of Noah and the flood, it’s hard not to think of the Pope’s visit to Lesbos and the refugees this week. Archbishop David Moxon of the Anglican Centre is about to go to Lampedusa to collect a cross made from the wreckage of a refugee boat – a reminder that the Pope went there and celebrated Mass on an upturned boat. Somewhere in this is God’s covenant with Noah – never again will there be a flood. Yet of course we are constantly preoccupied with rising sea levels – and with the horrors of the journeys undertaken by the refugees and the migrants in their effort to find a better and safer life. And the Pope is identifying with them – with the risk they run of being engulfed by the sea – in their desperate search for a future.

And in this Easter season we continue to read resurrection stories – today of the raising of Tabitha, a woman of good works. And last week I saw people, thousands upon thousands of them, who believed that a touch, a prayer, a word from such a patently good and humble man as Pope Francis would transform their lives. I’ve seen bits of it before in my life and ministry. But never seen it so directly.

And finally we read an exchange which is really about what it means to be a disciple. They pester Jesus about whether or not he is the Messiah. But Jesus says that what matters is that his sheep hear his voice – he knows them and they follow him.

The other event taking place this week has been the meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council in Lusaka, Zambia. Some didn’t come but nobody walked out. By Anglican standards that is pretty good going. The major study for this group has been a document on Intentional Discipleship. The church is not about numbers or members but about Christians who live out their faith in everyday life. It seems to me that that is one of the great challenges for this or any church.

It’s easy to be judgemental about other people. But years as a parish priest taught me never to underestimate the depth or the strength of faith which people hold. And this is about trying to encourage people to rise above concepts just of membership to the point where discipleship becomes a dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ, where the Spirit moves as the shaper of their lives and where priorities and choices are deeply affected by faith. You may think that that is a statement of the obvious – and of course it is. But I am also painfully aware that in the everyday ebb and flow of the life of the church which you and I experience there is more in play than just discipleship – there is fear and longing, there are aspects of identity and belonging, there is deep conservatism which is about security, there are reservoirs of anger which are untouched by the healing power of Christ. Jesus says that what matters is that the sheep hear his voice – he knows them and they follow him.