21 July 2019: Choral Matins
The Fourth Sunday after Trinity
Deuteronomy 30:1–10, 1 Peter 3:8–18
The Venerable Martin Gorick, The Archdeacon of Oxford

I don’t know if you’ve been watching the Moon Landings this weekend. I was seven years old when my Mum called me in from the garden to see the moment live on our tiny black and white TV. The achievement was incredible, as was the sight of the earth from far away, a beautiful disc of blue and green set against the cold blackness of space. Seeing that for the first time brought the whole world together, if only for a moment, with Neil Armstrong’s immortal words, ‘One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.’

This week we heard very different words coming from the United States:

“It’s so interesting to see 'Progressive' Democrat Congresswomen, who originally came from countries whose governments are a complete and total catastrophe, the worst, most corrupt and inept anywhere in the world now loudly telling the people of the United States, the greatest and most powerful Nation on earth, how our government is to be run,”

"Why don’t they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came!?"

The words come from Donald Trump, as he was attacking four women of colour, all members of Congress in the United States. He has spent much of the week singling this group of women as the subjects for his most personal attacks. Perhaps the most chilling evening was at a Trump rally in North Carolina. Trump introduced each foreign sounding name as if in a Pantomime, with the crowd encouraged to boo and hiss as each was read out. Despite his suggestion that they are foreigners, all four of the women are American citizens, and three of them were born in the USA, one just down the road from Trump himself. Telling them to go home to the corrupt and ineptly led countries from which they came, was ironic to say the least… But then he ended the list of female minority ethnic hate figures with the one who is not only a Muslim, but Somali born. At the sound of her name the crowd began to chant, ‘Send her back!’ ‘Send her back!’ It was
a chilling sight, and quite awful to witness from a democratic and majority Christian nation.

Contrast that with words from 1 Peter 3, read for us earlier in this service.

‘Those who desire life
   and desire to see good days,
let them keep their tongues from evil
   and their lips from speaking deceit;
let them turn away from evil and do good;
   let them seek peace and pursue it.

It is the oldest political trick in the world, to find and define an enemy and then unite the rest of the people against them. You will lose some votes, but hope to pick up many more by having such a clear ‘us and them’ message. And it can be so destructive, in this case for women and all people of colour. We all know of the racism that was unleashed by the Brexit referendum in this country. Last week I was talking to a young black friend who lives in Essex. She works in central London and drives to the station each day to get her train. The traffic jams are terrible and I asked her had she tried cycling. ‘I don’t feel safe coming home in the dark,’ she said. ‘Since the referendum I have had so much racist abuse thrown at me in the street.’

Careless talk costs lives. Political leaders of countries like the United States have tremendous influence. They can use words, and twist the truth as they set up ‘enemies of the people’. The Brexit referendum played the race card, suggesting that millions of Syrians and Turks would descend on these shores if we stayed within the European Union. We are still where we were of course, three years later, and our country has hardly been swamped by refugees or Turkish migrants. But the hatreds and prejudices of a few have been encouraged to become more mainstream with damaging effects for ordinary people.

We are close friends with America, and share so many wonderful things in common, and long may that be so. That’s why we have to call out dangerous rabble rousing when we see it, because our continent is all too well aware where that can lead.

Our first reading talks of people going back. But God is talking about his own people. Those who are faithful to him. He doesn’t ‘Send them back’ as that awful chant suggested, he leads them Home. And home means coming back to him and to their true destiny as children of God. Loving God and neighbour, heart and soul.
There are common enemies that we can all unite against: racism, poverty, and environmental destruction to name just three.

And 1 Peter 3 takes up the call, with an invitation to us all to live through blessing not cursing; inspiring love, not stoking the fires of hate.

‘Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. For ‘Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit; let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace… *in this beautiful planet of blue and green.* let them seek peace and pursue it.’

Amen.