

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflexion – 19th Sunday after Trinity – 18th October 2020

Service at All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Today the church keeps the Feast of St Luke, the friend of the apostle Paul who described him as 'our beloved Luke, the physician' (*Colossians 4.14*). In our Epistle today he is mentioned as being Paul's only companion in prison (*2 Timothy 4.11*). Luke is believed to be the author of two books of the New Testament – the Gospel which bears his name and the Acts of the Apostles, parts of which are written in the first person. He is thought to have been a Greek, unlike the other three Evangelists who were from the Jewish tradition. Throughout his writings Luke emphasises that the good news of salvation is for all, regardless of religious affiliation, nationality, social position or gender. Tradition has it that he was one of the seventy disciples sent out by Jesus, as described in our Gospel reading today.

Luke is the patron saint of physicians and surgeons, which is why the focus of our service today is on wholeness and healing. All who work in our healthcare services, from the most senior to the most junior, have been on our hearts this year. We should applaud them not just once a week or once a day, for it is a vocation that demands sacrifice, the contours of which become more visible in a pandemic.

Wholeness, healing, salvation: hallmarks of the good news of which Jesus taught and, through his actions, revealed. 'Wholeness' is a word we rarely find outside the New Testament, yet in the older translations it is often found on his lips: 'Your faith has made you whole.' (The modern translations say 'your faith has made you well'.) Luke, the physician, records the stories of healing by Jesus - and, in the Acts of the Apostles, by Peter, Paul and others - with a combination of awe and a sense that these events were bringing people close to the heart of the divine. There is something about 'wholeness' that stands counter to all that may afflict us as humans, in particular the sense of disintegration we feel when what matters most to us is felt to be in danger: our health or the health of those we love, our mental wellbeing, our sense of identity or purpose, the things we devote our lives to. It is good to pray for wholeness, and to search for it through Christ amid what the Collect calls 'the changes and chances of this fleeting world'.

Later we will pray for those known to members of our congregations who are in need of healing at this time. What does it mean to pray for someone's healing? I once attended a talk by Mark Vernon, the English writer on spirituality and former Anglican priest who describes himself as an 'agnostic Christian'. At the end of the talk, someone asked him what he did when he was asked to pray for people. Mark Vernon replied that he did pray for them, though without being entirely sure of the good that it would do. I asked him whether, if he himself were ill, he would wish to be prayed for. The answer was an immediate and unqualified 'yes'.

What does it mean when we say we will pray for someone who is ill? At its simplest, prayer means 'giving loving attention'. But what are we praying *for*? It has been

said that there are three types of prayer in this context. First, asking God for a miracle. When someone is seriously ill, even if the evidence is that they are unlikely to survive, we often find ourselves praying for recovery – hope against hope - through the skill of medical professionals, the availability of a rare treatment, or a combination of factors which no one may fully understand. It's an impulse, whether or not we call ourselves believers, to will God into bringing life from death. It's a prayer of resurrection.

Then there is a prayer for strength in suffering, as we ask that the person we love will find acceptance of what is happening to them, courage and patience to last them through the time of distress and, for those of faith, the sense that God in Christ will be alongside them in their suffering. It's a prayer of incarnation.

Then there is a third kind. If we cannot find it in us to ask for a miracle, but we want to pray for more than acceptance, there is a prayer that, if this has to be, let it somehow be not only a time of pain and sorrow but also of grace and gift. A prayer that this may be a time when the person we care for finds a depth of love, companionship and truth they have never known before; that as they stare down the approach of death they may have a richer sense of the wonder of living, a thankfulness for all they have seen and known, an ability to bless others as they face challenges themselves, and a piercing insight into the heart of God. We pray that they may discover their real nature and destiny and see a glimpse of heaven beyond. It's a prayer of transfiguration.

In my final year at school the news came through that a gifted pupil who had left a couple of years earlier had died of cancer at the age of 19. The head master preached a sermon about it which I have never forgotten. He read out a letter from the boy's mother in which she described how, when all treatment options had been exhausted, her son had gone to spend a few weeks in a monastery in the foothills of the Himalayas, from which he had returned at peace, reconciled with what was happening to him, loving to those around him and facing his approaching death with courage. She concluded: 'I don't feel sorrow or anger any more, but just a little pride.' The sermon ended with the words: 'He may not have been cured, but he was whole.' It was only later that I discovered that the head master had himself lost a daughter to cancer at the age of six, a child whose doctors said of her that she was teaching them. Human stories that speak of transfiguration.

Our Gospel today describes Jesus's commission to the seventy disciples on their first missionary journey. They are to go out 'like lambs into the midst of wolves', with no money, no protection against the elements, just each other for company. It seems an apt reading for our times. There is a sense at the moment that we all face what lies ahead unprotected. Yet all of us - whether or not we call ourselves believers - are called to bring comfort, reassurance, companionship and support to those we know and love in the months ahead. There may be fear, suffering and death. But let us pray that there may also be grace and gift, albeit in ways we do not understand. That somehow, through God's grace, there may be transfiguration.

Why? Because of the faith, hope and love to which we are called. In an article entitled *'Is love more real when grounded in faith?'*, Mark Vernon put it like this: 'The life of faith detects that there is a divine love that is there waiting. It holds all because it is the source of the love that flows through all. Fear and uncertainty do not cease. Human love always feels a bit like that. But faith is the felt sense that love can be trusted because love is, in truth, the ground of reality.' That seems to me a pretty clear insight into the heart of God, even if it calls itself 'agnostic Christianity'.

Last week our service ended with the words: 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.' This week we have heard the words which follow next in Luke's Gospel: 'Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.' I would like to suggest that it is the words at the end of Jesus's commission to his disciples that we should take with us into the months ahead, whatever they bring: 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' For, in Christ, it has and does.

Amen.