



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

*28th June 2020
3rd Sunday after Trinity*

Reflection

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Our three readings today are, in their different ways, about where we place our allegiance.

The message in our Gospel reading lies at the heart of Matthew's account of Jesus's ministry. It is all about welcome. The divine implications of hospitality were a common theme in the Ancient Mediterranean world. We think of Abraham entertaining angels unawares, and there were similar traditions for the Greeks and Romans – by extending welcome to a stranger you might be welcoming a god. Here, Jesus is concluding his instructions to the twelve to go out and proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near. They are both to receive hospitality and to give it. And, through them, we too are invited both to represent Christ to the stranger and to encounter Christ in the stranger.

Jesus gives three examples of hospitality. First, the obvious ones that it should be extended to prophets and righteous people, from which reward will follow. But then he goes further: hospitality must also be given to those with no status. Followers of Christ are to go out into the world and welcome all in his name, especially those referred to as the 'little ones' – people whom the world rejects: the poor, the vulnerable, the homeless, the marginalised. For it is in them that we will meet Christ. This passage in chapter 10 anticipates the better known one in chapter 25 in which Jesus instructs his disciples that each time they provide for the hungry and thirsty, clothe the naked and visit the sick or those in prison, they will be doing it for him. They will both have encountered and embodied Christ, and their reward will be the kingdom of heaven.

The message for us is clear: if we align ourselves with Christ, stand in solidarity with the dispossessed, our allegiance will be to God and his kingdom of justice. And we will find that the kingdom of heaven has come near.

The passage we heard from Paul's Letter to the Romans is about our deepest drives. In language we may find slightly shocking today, he talks of 'slavery' to sin as opposed to 'slavery' to righteousness (that is, 'being right' with God). Sin is often defined as what separates us from God, and there are patterns of behaviour in all of us that cause that separation - when we become self-centred, preoccupied with selfish desires and no longer turned outward towards God and neighbour. It is a good image for addiction, too – when desire for whatever temporary sense of wellbeing is being chased becomes out of control. That is a form of slavery, and it is always to be met with compassion rather than judgment. Months of lockdown have exacerbated addictive responses for some; and, for some, professional help will be needed. But for all of us, however we

may be feeling as we emerge from these strange weeks, to be reminded where we put our allegiance can be a starting point on the road to rebalancing, getting things back into perspective. If we can hold onto God through the difficult times, we will find freedom.

Paul's language suggests there is almost a battle going on within us, and it is true that it can sometimes feel like that. So deeply are we enslaved to what Paul generically calls 'sin' – the things that separate us from God - that it is only a strong and opposing enslavement which can make a difference. It's a battle which the priest-poet John Donne, in the 17th century, wrote of in his poem 'Batter my heart':

'Batter my heart, three-person'd God ...

...

That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

... dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free...'

It does us good sometimes to reflect how we are enslaved to things. What Paul is asking is this: What matters most to us? Where do we place our allegiance? With our own desires, or with God?

Our Old Testament reading presents the most extreme example of where we place our allegiance. Abraham, the father of the people of Israel, is shown time and again trusting God despite a series of increasingly unsettling calls upon him.

In chapter 12 of Genesis, when he is 75, the Lord says to him 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.' ... The account says simply: 'So Abram went.' And, when he is 99, God promises that he and his wife Sarah, then aged 90, will have a son, Isaac. They are so astonished that they laugh, but they trust in what they have been told and in due course Isaac is born. Then comes the greatest test, which we heard read this morning, when God instructs Abraham to sacrifice his son to him. With astonishing faith he sets out to obey God's call on him. And after the passage we heard, an angel gives Abraham this message (which is one of the lessons we hear read in our service of nine lessons and carols at Christmas, so completely does it reverse the story of the disobedience in the Garden of Eden at the beginning of Genesis): 'Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. ... And by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.'

Abraham shows God that he is willing to give up the thing he loves most for something that he loves even more. God stops short of requiring such sacrifice from Abraham, but in the fullness of time God does not stop short of offering it from himself. For he gave his own Son for us – giving up the thing he loved most for something he loved even more: us.

In return, where do we place our allegiance?

Amen.