

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Reflection – 13th Sunday after Trinity

29th August 2021

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Words from today's gospel: *Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'*

This summer I read a news story that made my heart sink. Volunteers for the Royal National Lifeboat Institute were sharing experiences of the "vile abuse" they'd encountered from members of the public. Coming ashore with those they'd rescued, including young children, people in desperate need of medical attention, they were met by attackers hurling beer cans and foul-mouthed abuse. This isn't the place to repeat it: these are things that defile.

But reading on, I cheered up. Facing political attacks from predictable quarters, within 24 hours the RNLI had received £200,000 in donations – a huge increase in giving and of people offering to volunteer. Decency still exists. Defending the men and women who go out to rescue people in distress on the sea, the head of the RNLI said: "They go home after a shout secure in the knowledge that without their help, the person they rescued may not have been able to be reunited with their own family. That is why they do what they do."

We've been truly blessed to live for many years in a society where, despite political differences, we've nevertheless largely shared a sense of what makes for acceptable behaviour. In most parts of Europe non-violence, social justice, human

rights - these have been understood as the bedrock of how a peaceful and civilised society should behave.

Lately I've been reading the French philosopher Frédéric Lenoir. In *Le Christ Philosophe* he questions whether or not such values would have become so deeply embedded in western society without the influence of Jesus – so radical in so many ways. He rejected exclusivity: women and children were welcome in the crowds and as his followers, he sat at table with publicans and sinners. Lepers, “unclean” women and madmen, the paralysed servant of an occupying Roman centurion - all were healed, none rejected. Jesus had compassion for *people*. Castes, tribes, different nations and religious groups, none of these distinctions interested him: he saw human need and knew the secrets of the human heart. The *Good Samaritan* was ... a despised Samaritan! Thank God: our lives have not been defined by violence, poverty and war – yet in our security, some of us may have forgotten, and more have never known such horrors. In a week when our screens have been filled with shocking scenes from Kabul, can we ignore the reality of what it must be like to live such precarious existences?

In today's reading from Deuteronomy God's people are told of the special place they hold in God's heart. Yet the text warns them: *“But take care and watch yourselves closely”*. The psalmist makes it equally clear. Those *“who may rest upon your holy hill”* do so by virtue of their faithfulness to his laws. And in the gospel reading from Mark, Jesus gets to the heart of an issue we see so often in his preaching - the hypocrisy of the religious classes: *This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.* But God is not fooled by outward religious observances: *Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.*

Here Jesus pokes fun at the notion of “clean” and “unclean” foods. Elsewhere we see what he thinks of the religious authorities who attack him for healing a sick man on the Sabbath or who, in the name of the Law, cry out for a woman to be stoned to death. They *abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.* As followers of Christ, we too need to *“take care and watch ourselves closely”*. When we call ourselves Christians we're called to look beyond the cultural

expectations of our society. Jesus asks us to show love and compassion to others, especially those who are in need. Whether a family is fleeing war or persecution or simply dire poverty, in this unjust and unequal world he shows us the way to respond: to show the same respect and decency he showed to those in need, to have a mind willing to understand how life may have brought others to desperate situations. Culture, status, religion, background, for Jesus these were irrelevant.

I don't know if you read about the attacks on the RNLI crews, but if you did, how did you react? Many of us feel unsettled by these 'strangers' who approach us for help. The situation is complex: multiple waves of immigration and problems of cultural integration have left many people feeling threatened, fearing that old ways of life are being lost. We can't minimize the potential dangers: at Kabul airport the security services have picked up people on 'no fly' lists – those deemed to pose a real threat to the UK. This natural wariness can sometimes grow into anger against 'outsiders'. The drawbridges start to go up. We see cuts in overseas aid budgets and going back on promises to help those left in vulnerable situations.

In these difficult times many people are under stress. Coronavirus, climate change, mass migration and the growing divide between rich and poor – all these are creating strains in society, polarizing opinions and causing growing intolerance. In times of trouble so often the weakest groups become the scapegoats for society's ills and European history shows us only too well the dark places that open up once a group becomes a political target. The Catholic philosopher René Girard pointed out that Jesus was the first scapegoat to understand the need for his death and to forgive those who inflicted it. His sacrifice upon the Cross shows the stupidity of scapegoating the innocent victim. None of us is perfect and if our own lives are relatively comfortable and we don't feel threatened personally, we mustn't forget that others may genuinely be struggling with issues that draw them to hate speech and extremism.

But perhaps you felt angry when you heard about the asylum seekers pelted with cans and abuse. Would anger be an appropriate response? Possibly. Jesus himself was furious as he turned out the dealers from the Temple. He was clear that people who claim to love God are always accountable for their behaviour. More often he calls on us to reflect. Think of him slowly tracing his finger in the sand as the crowd intent on stoning the adulteress melts away. *He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.* (John 8:7). *Watch yourselves, he says, If your brother*

sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. (Luke 17.3) or again, If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. (Matthew 18.15). Whether through anger or gentle persuasion, the message is still the same: when evil rears its ugly head, stand firm, don't let it pass. He doesn't pretend that will be easy.

Today's reading from the Letter of James sums up neatly what Christ means when he asks us to take up our cross: *"be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ... those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act - they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."*

I'll leave the last word to the head of the RNLI. In response to those criticising their humanitarian work he said of the United Kingdom: "These islands have the reputation for doing the right thing and being decent societies, and we should be very proud of the work we're doing to bring these people home safe."

Amen.