

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

Sermon – 12th Sunday after Trinity – 30th August 2020

Reflection

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This week I had to update my Safeguarding training. The last time I did it was a couple of years ago when 12 of us from All Saints met up in Saint Raphaël with other church members from across Provence. Although the subject matter was tough, all agreed it had been worthwhile. This year, Covid restrictions have made face-to-face training impossible, so all sessions are being held online. Zoom, has its limitations, but we can see one another, and it was clear that some of the participants were moved by the testimony they heard. Although we can become de-sensitised to the plight of other people when protected by our TV screens, when distress is seen up close it's much harder to ignore.

I suppose that the stories we heard were all the more shocking because the victims of abuse had suffered harm in the very place where they might have expected to find a refuge - in the supposedly-safe space of the church. In preparation for the training we were asked to meditate on Psalm 91 - a set psalm for Compline. An assurance of God's protection, it begins:

You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust."

We were asked to imagine what it might feel like for a child, a young person or indeed an adult, to have this trust destroyed. Given what we now know about widespread abuse, it's a question we should all contemplate. But, you might ask, what does any of that have to do with today's readings? Well, a great deal as it turns out: they all concern the problem of suffering, how we face it and how it affects our relationship with God. In the Old Testament lesson, Jeremiah is feeling quite sorry for himself. Life is so unfair: he does his best to spread God's word, and all he gets in return is pain. Yet taking a moral stand is rarely without

repercussions. He might expect to face criticism from those who don't like his message.

If we decide to go God's way, then there will be consequences – both good and painful. In the gospel reading, Jesus makes it plain: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.* The prize is enticing and it's worth taking up the challenge: *For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?* Following the Lord is the right choice, but we'd do well to heed St Paul's advice on how to cope with the challenges en route: *Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.* These are not unattainable platitudes but sound, practical advice on how to face evil and suffering.

But that's not the path Jeremiah is choosing. Far from it! He has instead allowed himself to become infected by self-pity and bitterness. Feeling himself '*under the weight of (God's) hand*, he finds himself alone, set apart from the *merrymakers* who not only seem to be having all the fun, but also completely ignore what he has to say and persecute him for his beliefs. He is a holy man, dedicated to serving God, but the joy and delight he once experienced in his calling have gone. His experience gives us an example of pain which is in part self-inflicted. Not only is he now at odds with those he wants to reach, he feels separated from and abandoned by God himself. His pain is *unceasing*, his wound *uncurable*, *refusing to be healed*.

God's response is clear and instructive: *If you turn back, I will take you back ...* Jeremiah's whole attitude has been quite wrong: he has been asking for retribution on his persecutors, but he fails to look at fundamental problems in his own relationship with God. *Truly you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail*, wails Jeremiah, but it's his own, self-centred attitude that has cut him off from God. Of course people no longer listen to what he has to say! God tells him to turn back from his self-imposed misery and isolation. Jeremiah has been full of his own ideas about how things should be. But if he will *turn back*, people will once again want to listen: *If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth. It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them.* Jeremiah has to drop the fixed ideas which prevent him from accepting God for who he is.

Peter's response to Jesus in the Gospel reading shows a similar inability to accept Jesus for who he is: *God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.* Jesus' rebuke is fierce: *Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.* Peter's reaction is very human – we can sympathise with it. He loved Jesus. How could he possibly imagine that God would allow his Son, the Messiah, to suffer death at the hands of his enemies? What a shocking and unbelievable idea to a mere mortal like Peter who had very different notions of the Messiah's mission! Like Peter and Jeremiah, so often we set our minds *not on divine things but on human things*, but "*my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are **your ways my ways,**" declares **the LORD.*** (Isaiah 55:8). In the world that Peter, the disciples and ourselves have joined, *those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

God calls on Jeremiah to turn back – to find again his right place before him. In today's psalm the writer also believes that he's followed God's commandments and is a righteous person, but his starting point is very different: God will make his judgement, he will not judge God. *Test me, O Lord, and try me; examine my heart and my mind.* The psalmist accepts that God is in charge. He feels able to come into his presence:

I will wash my hands in innocence, O Lord, that I may go about your altar,
to feel thankful:

To make heard the voice of thanksgiving and tell of all your wonderful deeds.

and to love him:

Lord, I love the house of your habitation and the place where your glory abides.

Jesus never promised his disciples an easy life. He warned them that they would have to take up their cross if they wanted to follow him. In today's Gospel Jesus warns them that even the Son of Man will not be spared from suffering. But his death on the cross was not, and never would be the end. St Paul was clear that those who follow Christ will have enemies, will be persecuted – but he gives the members of the Church sound advice: don't let those who harm you turn you into what they have become. Meet evil with goodness *hold fast to what is good.*

There is much in the world today that runs counter to the goodness of God. That has always been the case, and it will always be so. As John pointed out in his reflection on the parable of the wheat and tares several weeks ago, weeds always

come up alongside the good crop, but we have to be patient. The ultimate message of that parable and of today's readings is one of optimism: we may find ourselves surrounded by evil events and people of ill will, but ultimately the harvest will be good. Despite appearances, God's laws ultimately rule this universe.

In March a neo-Nazi gunman murdered 51 people in Christchurch and injured many more. Most were shot in the back whilst at prayer. One victim, a three year old boy, was shot twice at point blank range. On Thursday the gunman was sentenced to life imprisonment without possibility of parole, but before he was sentenced he had to listen to more than 80 statements from survivors. It must have taken great courage for those people to stand before him to tell him how his hatred had destroyed their families. But the final words from one young woman say it all. Sara Qasem, had lost her father, but she looked him in the eyes and told him, "In the end, love will always win."

Sure in the knowledge that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, our job is to *hold fast to what is good*. Yes, we may have to deny ourselves, yes, we may have crosses to bear: evil and suffering have always, and will always be a part of this world - but the prize of journeying with Christ is rich beyond our imagining: *those who lose their life for my sake will find it*

*they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you
to save you and deliver you, says the Lord.*

Amen