

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 18th Sunday after Trinity – Harvest Thanksgiving

3rd October 2021

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I have a friend who thinks there's a line in the passage we heard from the Book of Joel this morning that is the most moving verse in the whole Bible. Chapter 2, verse 25 of Joel says (in the Authorised Version): 'I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten'.

Not long after I was ordained, I found myself involved with two contrasting human situations in the same week. A beautiful wedding between two childhood sweethearts, who were married in an atmosphere of celebration and joy. And a tragic accident involving a young person of similar age, followed by an agonizing wait in hospital, their life hanging in the balance. Sometimes in the role of a priest you find yourself caught between parallel worlds, one of happiness and celebration, the other of unspeakable suffering and pain. How do you begin to reconcile them? And what, if anything, does it have to do with harvest?

Perhaps the experience of being caught between parallel worlds shouldn't surprise us. We know from our own lives that they are a mixture of joy and sorrow. It is more than two hundred years since the poet William Blake wrote:

‘Man is meant for joy and woe,
And, when this we rightly know,
Through the world we safely go.’¹

Most of us know which years in our lives are the ones the locust has eaten. There will be differences - they may involve things we have done, or things done to us, or things that have simply happened where no one is responsible. But the sensation of something irretrievably lost is the same.

For the writer of the Book of Joel, ‘the years that the locust has eaten’ was a metaphor for the worst thing that had ever happened – the exile of the people of ancient Israel from the promised land. Yet the paradox that runs through the Old Testament (much of it written during the exile) is that somehow the years of exile led the people to rediscover who they were, and that they felt closer to God in exile than they had in the promised land.

Over the last few years, a number of books have appeared based on what feels like the last evidence to be written down by eye witnesses of the Second World War. Letters and diaries are revealing more about its impact on the lives of ordinary people, and the extraordinary things they did in response. Most of us feel there is nothing in our own experience which comes close to what they went through. Or at least that is how it seemed until the pandemic hit last year, when for the first time in our lives we were confronted with disruption, fear and uncertainty on a scale that felt global, even if not – for the majority – irretrievable.

‘I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.’ What does ‘restore’ mean? If you lend me something and I break it, there are times when it won’t

¹ *Auguries of Innocence* (1805)

be enough if I buy you another one. It might be an item given to you by someone special, with emotional associations that are irreplaceable. In that case, there is a difference between replacement and restoration. But if I get the item mended, will it be the same? Is there any way it can be restored?

The theological power of harvest is that it is about two things - the goodness of God's creation, and the sense of the scythe that cuts us down. In harvest two things are separated from one another – the things that are good and go on to make bread, and the things that are not edible and either go back into the soil or become food for animals. Looked at in that way, in harvest nothing is fundamentally wasted. It means, metaphorically speaking, that the positive experiences of our lives are edible and the negative experiences go back into the soil or become food for animals. There is a profound message in that, something we normally glimpse only when we have enough distance to see our lives in retrospect. We are usually unable to see it in the crucible of our present experience.

There's a statue that portrays well the impossibility of seeing beyond negative experiences. The whole world saw the statue, did they but know it, on 16th April 2019, the day after the fire at Notre Dame de Paris. It was in all the pictures broadcast, in front of the high altar, suddenly exposed to the elements, somewhat dirtier than usual but unmistakable in its message. The statue is a Pietà, made of white marble – a portrayal of the Virgin Mary cradling the dead Christ. On her face is a look of anguish, and from her mouth comes a silent scream.

The expression on her face reminds me of a description I once read of the first performance of Bertolt Brecht's play *Mother Courage*. The critic George Steiner wrote of how the actress, Helene Weigel, who was playing Mother Courage,

reacted in the play to the news that her son had been killed: 'A harsh and terrifying, indescribable sound issued from her mouth. But, in fact, there was no sound. Nothing. It was the sound of absolute silence. A silence which screamed and screamed throughout the theatre, making the audience bow their heads as if they had been hit by a blast of wind.'²

The Pietà in Notre Dame tells of all the pain, the heartache, the desolation of the human condition, and on 16 April 2019 it reflected back some of the emotion being felt at the damage suffered by that much-loved place. What you may not have seen in those pictures, if you did not know they were there, is that on either side of the mother cradling her son are two small figures. They do not touch her, yet they hold her between them, silently watching, willing her on. They are angels, sorrowful but determined. The little figures point to the value of presence, of compassion and community and solidarity. But if you stand too close to the statue, you don't notice they are there. As with our times of wilderness, the years that the locust has eaten, we rarely gain any sense of their meaning when we are too close to them.

But it is significant that the two angels are to be found at the point in time between crucifixion and resurrection. For resurrection is about the eternal re-generativity of God. It's what we celebrate each week in the Eucharist, when Christ's body becomes our food and we in turn become the body of Christ, sent out into the world to become his feet, hands and eyes.

The notion of God's re-generativity also lies at the heart of the notion of harvest. Nowadays in a sermon for Harvest Festival it is customary to preach about ecology. In fact, in the notion of harvest we discover that the heart of the ecological movement and the heart of Christian theology are similar. Both are

² George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, 1961.

about 'recycling', not throwing away. For that is not the way God fundamentally works. After the resurrection, Christ's wounds are still visible. Christ is restored, not replaced. It is true of us, too. We are changed by the years that the locust has eaten, but sometimes we emerge from them stronger, in ways we could never have predicted. Or, at least, we are able to reach a place where they no longer define us.

What is revealed at Easter, and in our own lives if we have eyes to see, is God's ability to bring something new out of what seems irretrievably lost. God's re-generativity. That is how the parallel worlds in which I found myself early in my ministry, and frequently again since, are ultimately reconciled.

Blake understood this when he wrote:

'Man is meant for joy and woe,
And, when this we rightly know,
Through the world we safely go.

He added:

Joy and woe are woven fine,
A clothing for the soul divine.'

Or, as the poet Edith Sitwell wrote, in a poem published during the Second World War:

'... nothing is lost and all in the end is harvest.'³

Amen.

³ *Eurydice* (1940-45).