

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – All Saints' Day - 5th November 2023

All Saints' Marseille

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“I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” (Rev 7.9) A majestic image, akin to Fra Angelico's depiction in the painting that illustrates our service sheet: the blessed in the court of heaven, bathed in the radiance of God's glory.

As the faithful have done since the earliest centuries of Christianity, we gather today to give thanks for the lives and ministries of the saints, the blessed of God - women and men, young people as well as older ones – who, through both word and deed, bore witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is a day that brims with meaning because of the lives and stories it remembers. The calendar of commemorations of the Church of England offers interesting reading. There one can encounter apostles, evangelists, spiritual writers, philanthropists, martyrs, healers, poets and more, hailing from every time and place. Among them, some are renowned, others less known; some are inspiring, while others are puzzling. Some saints may hold a special place in your heart. Perhaps you bear the name of one of them (like Patrick or Elizabeth or Andrew). Perhaps you seek to emulate their examples in your life and work (such as Nicholas of Myra, the patron saint of sailors; Hildegard of Bingen, a poet and composer; Francis of Assisi, the brother of the Creation; Julian of Norwich, the mystic; the nurse Edith Cavell; Maximilian Kolbe, the martyr ...)

However, even if we were to combine the calendars of all Church traditions, they will not add up to that “great multitude that no one can count”, for this multitude includes people like our colleagues, or family members, or next-door neighbours, who lived out holiness in ordinary circumstances, often never to be recorded in a Church calendar.

Today we celebrate the saints – be they well known, little known or unknown - because they, in their diverse ways, often extraordinary but at times commonplace, embodied Christ's presence in a world marred by suffering. Theirs were the hands with which Christ could bless the world, as Teresa of Avila once beautifully put it. Their faith has transformed the world.

In both bigger and smaller ways, their lives embodied the essence of Christ's teaching in the Beatitudes. Their faithfulness to Christ led them to care for the sick, uphold justice for the oppressed, welcome the outcast, and show compassion to the vulnerable.

Amid the pervasive and frightening darkness in today's world, when many, understandably, feel overwhelmed and withdraw into helplessness and apathy, we turn once more to the Beatitudes, each of them a meditation on living a life of faith in a world filled with doubt. They are interconnected and deliberately ordered, akin to a ladder, with poverty of spirit as the starting point and with the cross at the summit. To live according to the Beatitudes is to embody a life infused with radical love for God and one's neighbour, as a response to God's abundance and provision in one's own life.

Today, let me dwell on the seventh step of the ladder: "blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." This step cannot be reached without ascending the others. The Hebrew word 'shalom', which we translate as 'peace', signifies more than the absence of hostility or conflict, though this is undoubtedly vital. The word embodies harmony, beauty, unity, virtue, safety, and justice. Therefore being a peacemaker means working for God's vision for his world: striving for justice, wholeness, and harmony in relationships, pursuing the good of others, even if it comes at personal cost. Thus all the saints, whether famous or little-known, were indeed peacemakers.

In 1902, when our church was consecrated, the dedication to 'All Saints' was chosen. It was an inspired choice, and perhaps a prophetic one: it signifies our journey toward becoming a multicultural, multi-ethnic, multidenominational community, committed to hospitality and open to dialogue. This day serves as a reminder of our responsibility to uphold our dedication faithfully, of our calling to be peacemakers.

Choosing to be peacemakers, both in actions and words, is a declaration of our belief that God watches over our individual stories and the larger narratives in

which we find ourselves. It is an affirmation that peace and love are stronger than violence and hatred, regardless of how things may appear in the present.

Some may engage in social or political activism to foster peace. However, for most of us, peacemaking happens in the ordinary contexts of everyday events and relationships. It starts with how we listen to each other, how we speak, how we extend hospitality, how we collaborate with those who differ from us. There is no act too small or insignificant when it comes to working for peace.

For our chaplaincy, All Saints' Day not only reaffirms our connectedness in the Body of Christ that transcends the limitations of time and space, but also serves as a reminder about our collective identity, existence, and mission. It is a day to remember that we are not alone, and that those who came before us bear witness to our journey. It is a day to acknowledge the thread of love running through them all and through us.

It is a day to remind ourselves that holiness of life is not the privilege of a chosen few or the great saints of history - it is God's call and will for each of us. It is at our baptism that we have received God's grace and call to holiness. It is a call to bear witness on earth to the Kingdom of God. It is a call to follow Christ in the pain and brokenness of the world. It is a call to become instruments of God's hospitality and mercy for the afflicted, and channels of God's peace for the world. It is nothing less than a call to transform the world.

May God give us all strength and faithfulness in this calling.

Amen.