

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

**6<sup>th</sup> June 2021**

**All Saints' Marseille**

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We are into what is known as Ordinary Time, the series of Sundays 'after Trinity' that stretch into late autumn, during which the Lectionary gives us readings that are 'related' to one another. Sometimes you have to search a bit to find just how they are related.

Today, at the start of Ordinary Time, we are given the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Immediately after they have eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which they had promised not to do, their deed is discovered by God 'walking in the garden in the cool of the day'. The event known as 'the Fall', or Original Sin - where it all went wrong for humanity. The couple had only been given one rule and they broke it, resulting in the loss of Paradise. What does that have to do with Jesus apparently refusing to see his family when the crowds are pressing round him, when his loved ones have arrived because people are saying he is having a mental health crisis?

The clue to the link between these readings lies in the last line of our Gospel passage: 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'. The thing that Adam and Eve had failed to do was 'the will of God'. The thread running through Jesus's ministry, from his baptism by John to the agony in the

Garden of Gethsemane, is his obedience to what he called 'my Father's will'. He constantly scanned the horizon for it, went up mountains to be alone so he could discern it, encouraged his disciples to search for it in their own lives, teaching them – and us - to pray: 'Thy will be done'.

You can see where Jesus gets it from. It is something Mary and Joseph instinctively did. From the beginning, we are told how they listened to angels, traditionally the messengers of God. When the angel gave the news that she was to be the bearer of the Christ-child, Mary said 'let it be with me according to your word' (Luke 1.38). When Joseph learned what was happening to her, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife'. And, when he awoke, he 'did as the angel of the Lord commanded him' (Matthew 1.18-30). Then, when the Holy Family were in danger from Herod, Joseph responds twice to an angel of the Lord appearing to him in dreams, by taking them first to safety in Egypt and then back to the land of Israel (Matthew 2.13-23).

Mary and Joseph listened to the 'still, small voice' of God - that sense of nudging we all feel from time to time that there is a 'right' thing to do, especially when our self-centred desires are telling us something else. The word 'obedience' comes from the Latin '*obedire*' – to listen. It's the first word of the first sentence in the Rule of St Benedict – 'Listen continually, my child, with the ear of your heart'.

Jesus must have grown up with a sense that it was important to listen, to be obedient, to the will of God. And now, on the face of it, it sounds as though he

is rejecting the very family who taught it to him. Does that sound just a little unfair? Would Mary have felt the sting of rejection?

Perhaps there's another way of looking at this scene. Perhaps we are too apt to see Jesus's words as binary – that he must be excluding his birth family in acclaiming the family forming in the new community around him. It's true that he's drawing a contrast with the narrow definition of 'family' on which we tend to focus, redefining it in terms of spiritual belonging, the ones with whom we are together in a community of faith. He is actually telling us what it means to be the Church.

The climax of this insight is pointed to by Jesus at his last hour. In the crucifixion account in John's Gospel, seeing his mother and the one referred to as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' standing together at the foot of cross, he says 'Woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother'. 'And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.' (John 19.26-27.) That's radical community. Some say that the Church began in 'that hour'.

But let's go back to Mark's account. I thought I had understood it well enough until I read an interesting article about it this week by Thomas Troeger<sup>1</sup>, a Professor at the Yale Divinity School. Troeger points out how the word 'family' can evoke good or bad memories, depending on whether our experience of it has been nurturing or fearful. For most people, 'family' means a complex mix of fulfilment and disappointment, companionship and conflict, gratitude and resentment. No passage in the Bible is likely to set off more associations about 'family' than the one we heard this morning.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas H Troeger, in *Feasting on the Gospels - Mark* (2014), p 105.

If our overall experience of family has been positive, we will probably read into this scene that Jesus's loved ones have arrived out of concern for his welfare, and that his words will have sounded heartless to them. But if our overall experience of family has been negative, Jesus's words might come as a source of relief to us, offering reassurance that it's possible to be part of a family of love and grace that doesn't depend on biological relationship.

The point is that, whilst our individual responses to the story are likely to reflect our own experiences of 'family', Mark's aim is to lift us beyond the limitations of personal experience. Whatever our experience of immediate family has been like, it can be redemptive for all of us to see the larger human community in all its variety and need and wonder. Jesus sets only one condition for being a member of this larger family: that we do the will of God.

That's not an abstract term for him. With his knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, when someone asks him what the most important commandment is, he replies: 'There are two. The first is to love God with all that you are, and the second is to love your neighbour as yourself.' Thomas Troeger points out:

'If we keep the first commandment, we will discover the unconditional acceptance and indestructible joy that not even the most loving human family can provide. If we have been abused by our families, we will discover the overflowing grace that can heal our wounds. If we keep the second commandment, we will have developed a healthy self-love, the kind of inner affirmation that releases us from the feelings of self-loathing and negativity that abusive families inculcate. In other words, keeping the two great commandments is a way of doing the will of God, and in the doing of God's will we find ourselves healed and empowered. Far from weakening families, Christ's statement that 'whoever does the will of God

is my brother and sister and mother' nurtures those qualities that make us healthy members of our immediate family and faithful members of Christ's unbounded circle of grace and love.'

That seems to me a helpful insight. I would go further and say that, despite what most people seem to assume, I don't think this scene is proposing something binary – that there's a choice to be made between birth family and faith family. Perhaps it's 'both-and'. For Jesus *did* know that Mary and Joseph were attentive to the will of God. How could he not? What he is doing is *extending* what he has learned through his own family to all those who have joined him 'on the Way'. If proof were needed, when we reach the Acts of the Apostles, we find that the early church grouped itself around none other than the members of Jesus's own family. His brother James and his mother Mary are at the centre of the fledgling church which formed after the Resurrection and which, in time, evolved into the worldwide community it is today.

In fact, what we heard in our reading today is the first intimation of Jesus at what the Church might become. In giving thanks for that, we shouldn't get too hung up on the narrative of decline we are used to in the West when thinking about Christianity. In 2020, over 2.3 billion people in the world identified as Christian – that's 31 % of the world's population. Which is a lot of family. Thanks be to God.

Amen.