

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 3rd Sunday before Advent

7th November 2021

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There is change in the air. Not just in the weather, which has turned significantly colder this week. There is change in the air in society too, in two respects which have been dominating the news this week, echoing with surprising force the atmosphere in two of our readings today. Today we move from counting Sundays 'after Trinity' to Sundays 'before Advent', as we arrive in what the church sometimes calls 'Kingdom season', the season which culminates in the last Sunday before Advent when we celebrate Christ as King.

'It's one minute to midnight'. That's how Boris Johnson referred to humanity's running down the clock on climate change in his opening speech at the COP26 climate summit last week. There is a real sense now that no one can ignore the damage we have done to the creation of which we are a part, a real sense that urgent action is needed by the whole world if disaster is to be avoided.

The climate emergency has brought with it at least one significant reversal. For the first time in decades, young people have become more vocal and active politically and are being listened to. However sceptical some may feel about the impact that climate change will have on them personally, they at least acknowledge that the world in which their children and grandchildren will have to live will be profoundly affected by decisions taken now. An 18 year old activist

has shown more consistency and focus about this than many of the most powerful leaders of the world, and it is making them uncomfortable. Whether or not young people profess any faith in a formal sense, they have a clearer sense that creation is a gift that needs to be cherished, a greater sense of its beauty and fragility. It's time for more of us older ones to repent and respond appropriately.

'It's one minute to midnight' was the message Jonah was asked by God to give to the people of Nineveh. Jonah's story, part of which we heard in our Old Testament reading, is told with much humour and irony. As is often in the case in Jesus's parables (notably the one about the Good Samaritan), it's partly a story about the wideness of God's mercy, and our less than generous reactions when we see it being given to others. Nineveh was the hated capital of the adjoining superpower, the Assyrian empire, which had brought huge suffering to the people of Israel. Jonah is told to go to Nineveh to warn the people that, unless they repent, God will destroy their city. But he doesn't want to go, so he tries to get away from God by boarding a ship. When a storm threatens the safety of all on board, he admits that he is probably the cause of it and allows himself to be thrown overboard to save the others. He is in turn saved by being swallowed by a large fish for three days.

By then Jonah has understood that there is no escape from what God has asked of him, so he consents to go to Nineveh. There he preaches a pretty brief sermon about the need to repent, at which point all the people of Nineveh immediately do repent and God forgives them. Jonah's response is to become furious. He didn't want God to forgive the people of Nineveh. He reckoned they had destruction coming to them. And if God was going to forgive them anyway, what was the point of all the effort he had put in? But God gently teases Jonah,

as a parent does a child, encouraging him not to be angry about the forgiveness others have received and showing to him the same generosity he has shown to them, nudging him back towards the light of love and forgiveness. It's a beautiful story, and good for us to hear when we in our turn are tempted to become judgmental. God has abounded in mercy. What are we going to abound in? How about if we started to care a whole lot better for God's creation, even if - especially if - it takes an 18 year old to tell us how.

I suggested at the beginning that change is in the air in society in two significant respects. What of the second? They are calling it 'the great resignation'. Over four million Americans quit their jobs in July alone this year, leaving many posts unfilled. Here in Europe we are seeing staff shortages in key areas too, the number of which is growing. Those in low paid work with long hours and poor working conditions are voting with their feet. (Long distance drivers are an example, but only one.) Those in better paid work, still with long hours and a culture that says the only acceptable reply to the word 'jump' is 'how high?', are also resigning, especially in mid-career, citing a reassessing of priorities in response to the pandemic.

These people are literally changing their lives, the Gospel word for which is 'repentance'. There is a sense of urgency about it. The pandemic has made many people ask themselves searching questions, including about whether the lives they are living reflect the things they value most.

Mark's Gospel narrates Jesus arriving in Galilee saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near'. This sense of urgency, of this being a time unlike any other, runs throughout Mark's account. It starts with fishermen leaving their nets on the beach, to the astonishment of their families and friends. Leaving to follow something that, deep inside themselves, they believe is more

important, of more value to them, even if it means a more precarious existence. Whether or not those taking part in the 'great resignation' profess any faith in a formal sense, they are in some sense following the example of those fishermen, without whose courage we would not have a Gospel to share today.

What does that Gospel require of us? What, when all is said and done, is the Christian life about? In some ways, the answer lies in the four verbs we find in our Gospel reading today: repent; believe; follow; fish.

Repent: realise how fortunate you are for God to have made you; in other words, get a proper sense of who you are, in the world and before God. Believe: enjoy the wonder of what God has given us. Follow: recognise that Jesus is the Way and that the Christian life is about following it. ('The Way' was the word used by the earliest Christians to refer to faith in Christ. How ready are we to live life as pilgrimage, opening ourselves to new experiences of heart, mind and soul as we travel, letting go of all that burdens us?) And, finally, fish: bring other people into the company of the good gifts you have got. Make them welcome, in all their beauty and mystery, diversity and challenge.

Repent; believe; follow; fish. It's not a bad slogan. It worked for Simon, for Andrew, for James and for John. 'Immediately he called them; and they left ..., and followed him.'

I wonder what priorities each of us needs to reassess. 'Kingdom season' is a good time to begin.

Amen.