ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Epiphany Sunday – 3rd January 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

I wonder if you saw it. On the shortest day, just after sunset, through a sea mist high above the city, the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. This astronomical event, sometimes referred to as the 'great conjunction', looks like a star of unusual brightness. Although it happens every twenty years, the one in December was closest to the earth for four hundred years and the closest observable conjunction for eight hundred years. The Renaissance astronomer Kepler thought it possible that the Star of Bethlehem might have been a sighting of the 'great conjunction'.

Whatever the origin of the Star of Bethlehem, it was unusual enough to cause the Magi to set out on their journey. We don't know much about the wise men. St Matthew tells us they were from the East – Persia or Arabia – and they were apparently astronomers. Since medieval times the tradition still celebrated with enthusiasm in Spain and Latin America identified them with the kings which the Old Testament prophets had foretold would come and pay homage to Israel when its fortunes were restored – as in our reading from Isaiah this morning, with its reference to kings coming 'to the brightness of your dawn' and the wealth of nations being offered in gifts of gold and frankincense.

At one level, the Magi represent the homage paid to the infant Jesus by strangers. As such, they represent us. Like us, for all their wisdom, they also travel uncertainly to the manger, in contrast to the shepherds who were given direct instructions on Christmas night from a host of angels. These visitors are more hesitant, less sure of themselves. They know that something compelling is there that needs to be discovered, but they find it difficult to know exactly where to look. I suspect that one reason why the Magi have such enduring appeal is not only who they are but what they do. What they do is to show a set of responses that are very human, the practice of which is beneficial to us.

The Magi begin by responding to mystery. They allow the star to get under their skin and set out to see where it leads them. Responding to mystery, to the sacred, to the intuition of a dimension other than ourselves, is an important part of what makes us understand our place in the universe and become attuned to the sense of a God of love at the heart of it all. We all experience it – the experience of beauty, of transcendence, what has been called 'the beyond in the midst'. But how often do we explore it? It's the first thing the Magi did.

The next thing the Magi do is to persevere. They pursue their road across inhospitable terrain and don't give up until they reach their goal. In doing so they expose themselves to risk. Not only the dangerous journey they embark upon, but also the risk represented by Herod. They use their powers of intelligence to calculate the path of the star, make the not unreasonable assumption that the obvious place to ask about the new born king is in a royal palace, and encounter a tyrant of the first order. The perceived threat which the new born Christ-child represented to Herod meant that, in the Magi's search

for him, Herod's spotlight is turned on them also. And his fury at being tricked by them has devastating results for the persecution of children in Bethlehem.

When they find the child, at the end of their long search, the Magi are overjoyed, and they kneel down and worship him. This brings us to the heart of their significance. It is their moment of Epiphany.

An epiphany is a moment when an important truth becomes clear – a moment of revelation. In the light of it we are able to understand our past and our future in a different way. For the Magi it is their encounter with the Word made flesh. An epiphany harnesses the capacity which is fundamental to our way of perceiving things: the capacity for wonder.

It is vital for us to pause, in the busyness of our lives, and allow ourselves to be captivated by wonder. Children are good at it, and Jesus pointed out that unless we are able to receive the gifts of God like children, we will miss the significance of the Kingdom. Our capacity for wonder helps us to pay attention to God. The Old Testament also teaches the importance of this. Moses saw the bush burning in the wilderness and it proved to be an encounter with God. The priest-poet R S Thomas wrote of the importance of this reflex for our lives, in his poem The Bright Field:

> 'Life is not hurrying
> on to a receding future, nor hankering after
> an imagined past. It is the turning
> aside like Moses to the miracle
> of the lit bush, to a brightness
> that seemed as transitory as your youth
> once, but is the eternity that awaits you.'

The Magi's response to their moment of epiphany is one which throughout history men and women have had: the response of worship. Aware of the cosmic significance of what they have seen – and cosmology was, after all, their

speciality – aware that they were encountering the very love of God incarnate, and that it was for the whole world, including them - they are 'overwhelmed with joy', and they kneel down, and pay homage.

Worship helps us to live thankfully, which in turn helps us to live positively. It also helps us to live outwards, away from our own concerns and preoccupations, more attuned to the needs of others. It's the dynamic of the two great commandments which Christ bequeathed to us, that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

The final response of the Magi is to offer their gifts – gold for royalty, frankincense for holiness, and myrrh for the self-sacrifice of the one they have come to worship. As Christina Rossetti's carol *In the Bleak Midwinter* asks: what can we give him? On the face of it, we have nothing to offer God, for all that we have we have received from God. Yet as a child does to a parent who has given a gift, the thing we *can* do is express our joy. And we can live thankfully, thoughtfully, kindly on this earth. Christ offers us a gateway of thanksgiving in the gift of himself in the Eucharist, to which our own response is thanks and praise. The response of the Magi was to worship. And it must be ours too. For the mystery of the Incarnation is that we may approach God knowing we are called, loved, wanted. As St John puts it, 'to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God'. (John 1.12-13.)

And so the Magi offer us a set of responses that can be life-changing: they open themselves to the sacred, they persevere in their pursuit of it, they take risks in their quest for it, they give thanks when they encounter it and are moved to

worship, and finally they offer in response the finest gifts of which they are capable.

There is one more thing the Magi did. They leave for their own country by another road. The thing about our encounter with this child is that it changes us. We are not the same when we leave. We are spurred by each of our encounters with Christ, to go out and be different from how we came in. We will fail, as we always do. But we won't be the same. For we have caught a vision of what is possible, of a life lived for others and for God, which will not let us go. And that, as we stand on the threshold of a new year – most especially this one, with its many challenges - is a source of hope.

The twentieth century mystic Thomas Merton wrote this:

> 'You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognise the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.'

That's what the Magi did. May we, through the grace of God, do the same in the weeks and months ahead.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – First Sunday after Epiphany – 10th January 2021

The Baptism of Christ

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

When I saw that I was due to preach today on the baptism of Christ, my first thought was to look forward to it, for it is such a beautiful story. As Jesus emerges from the water, he feels the touch of the Spirit and hears words from heaven that are among the most beautiful any person will ever hear: 'You are my child. I love you. You delight me.' Preaching on baptism is usually an opportunity to deliver an upbeat message about our faith in the trinitarian God.

But I began to feel a bit uneasy about preaching today, for two reasons. First, in recent years the atmosphere of a typical Church of England baptism service has become increasingly happy and clappy, at the same time as the language used in the service has become more sombre, referring more to sin and evil and death than in earlier versions (though this is actually a reconnection with the language of the early Church). This apparent mismatch can create a tension between what is apparently going on and what is being said. Sometimes when I take a non-churchgoing family through the responses, I sense their unease grow at what they might be getting their child into, when they thought this was going to be a happy occasion with all the family there and nice photos afterwards.

Secondly, I don't think any of us is feeling particularly upbeat at the moment. The news from the UK about the new variant of the coronavirus is anything but upbeat. It is downright scary. From a number of conversations I have had with friends there this week, it seems that even those who have felt mentally resilient for the last year are struggling. Within our chaplaincy the list of families affected by this crisis, directly or indirectly, grows ever longer. (You will have noticed that the number of people for whom we are praying by name on Sundays has trebled over the last few weeks.) It doesn't feel as though there's much to be happy or clappy about this morning.

And yet baptism is fundamental to our Christian faith. It is so foundational that you can only do it once. Even if you wish to change denominations, you can't get baptised again. It's that basic to our identity. Happy and sombre? Clappy and scary? What, we might ask, is going on?

If we look at Mark's account of Jesus's baptism, there is actually a tension there already. In the words used - 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' - Mark's original hearers would have picked up two separate scriptural references. 'You are my Son' is from verse 7 of Psalm 2, words which were part of the coronation ritual for a Judean king. But this is combined with the words: 'With you I am well pleased', which are from Isaiah 42.1, introducing the Servant of the Lord – the one who would establish justice, bring captives out from the dungeons, but who would also suffer terribly. So there is tension, even in that sentence. This is a king, but also the Suffering Servant, the figure from the prophecy of Isaiah with whom Jesus closely identified. We begin to see why tensions might also be felt within the liturgy of baptism.

While I was pondering these things, I came across a small book by Rowan Williams with the disarmingly simple title *Being Christian.* In it he reflects on these tensions and shows that they are in fact a natural part of the Christian life. I found his reflections on baptism very helpful for the time we are living through, so I hope you will allow me to share them with you.

Rowan Williams notes that the root of the word 'baptism' means simply 'to dip', to immerse something. The Gospels record John baptising people by immersing them in the River Jordan. But Jesus also uses the word 'baptism' to refer to the suffering and death that lie ahead of him (Mark 10.38). He speaks in terms of being immersed in them, 'swamped' by them. From the very beginning, 'baptism' into the Christian community was associated with the idea of going down into the darkness of Jesus's suffering and death, of being 'swamped' by the reality of what he endured.

As the early Church began to reflect on this and to shape its liturgy, another set of associations developed. The story of Jesus's baptism, as told in the Gospels, tells of Jesus going down into the water of the Jordan, and when coming up out of it the Holy Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove, and a voice speaks from heaven. The early Christians began to make connections with another story involving water and the Spirit, those words from the first chapter of Genesis which we heard this morning. Water in the Bible is traditionally the symbol of chaos. God's Spirit hovers over it, and out of the chaos comes the world, and God says 'this is good'. What with the water and the Spirit and the voice, the early Christians began to associate baptism with the exact image that St Paul used for the Christian life: 'new creation'. Baptism came to be looked on

as a restoration of what it is to be truly human. To be baptized was to recover the humanity God first intended – that we should live with such love and trust in him that we could be called God's sons and daughters.

Importantly, this is not about being exclusive or protected in some way. The new humanity created around Jesus is not a humanity that is always going to be happy or successful or in control of things, but a humanity that can reach out its hand from the depths of chaos to be touched by the hand of God. It means that, if you ask where you might expect to find the baptized, one answer is 'in the neighbourhood of chaos'. You will find Christian people near those places where humanity is most at risk, most in need. You will find them in the neighbourhood of Jesus, and Jesus is invariably to be found near human confusion and suffering.

Rowan Williams adds that you might also expect to find the baptized Christian near to, or in touch with, the chaos in their own life – because all of us have muddle inside us too - and baptism means not being afraid to look with honesty at that. It means being with Jesus 'in the depths' – the depths of human need, including the depths of our own selves in their need – but also in the depths of God's love; in the depths where the Spirit is re-creating human life as God intended it to be.

All this seems to me very relevant for our time, a source of comfort for those not feeling at their most resilient at the moment, and a profound source of hope. As the author puts it:

> 'The person who has been baptized is not only in the middle of human suffering and muddle but also in the middle of the love and delight of the

> Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That surely is one of the most extraordinary mysteries of being Christian. We are in the middle of two things that seem quite contradictory: in the middle of the heart of God, and in the middle of a world of threat, suffering, sin and pain. And because Jesus has taken his stand right in the middle of those two realities, that is where we take ours.'

So perhaps the time we are living through is not as unprecedented as we think. And that, instead of a sermon on baptism being difficult to preach or to hear at the moment because it is difficult to feel upbeat, we have been reminded that baptism is profoundly rooted in how things are. And that, however much our instinct might be to seek refuge from suffering, it is actually where we are called to be. For when we are called to be where Jesus is, we must let our defences down as we immerse ourselves into his life, death and resurrection. And then, by grace, we will find that within the depths of human chaos we are strengthened by his Spirit as we take our stand with Jesus in his risks of love and solidarity.

And that is why, as we come up out of the waters of baptism, we may hear the words that Jesus himself heard: 'This is my son, my daughter.' And know that we are part of a humanity that can reach out its hand from the depths of chaos, to be touched by the hand of God.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Third Sunday of Epiphany – 24th January 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

I think I only began to understand the significance of this story when someone pointed out to me how much came out of the water jars: between 800 and 1200 bottles of fine wine. That was quite a lot to top up the supply at a village wedding. The story comes right at the beginning of John's account of Jesus's ministry. John calls it a 'sign', something that points beyond itself. A revealing of the significance of Jesus, which is why it is set as a reading for the season of Epiphany.

A village wedding is a happy event, but something has gone wrong. They have run out of wine. That would be embarrassing on any social occasion, but in a culture where shame and honour mattered much more than in our own, it would have been something of a disaster for the hosts. It's a story full of vivid human detail, not least the conversation between Jesus and his mother. His words may sound rather harsh when translated into English: 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' The word 'Woman' is actually less harsh in the original Greek, and it can be spoken with tenderness – we think of the next time we hear it from Jesus's lips, as he hangs on the cross: 'Woman, behold your son.' For that is the only other moment

when we meet Jesus's mother in the Fourth Gospel. And so Jesus's words at the wedding of Cana already point ahead to the crucifixion, of which he says just before it takes place: 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son'. For John, the crucifixion is the ultimate moment when heaven and earth meet. 'Signs' like the wedding at Cana point ahead to it.

But for now we are in the wedding feast, and Jesus is speaking to his mother. I like the snippets of conversation that we are given in the Gospels, for they offer us an insight into Jesus's personality, his humanity. Having known him for thirty years, his mother knows how to handle her son. Even though he is protesting, she tells the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' She knows he will intervene to help, and she is right. This brief exchange reminds us of the story Jesus himself tells in Matthew's Gospel account, about two sons who are asked by their father to go and work in his vineyard. One son says no, but later changes his mind and goes. The other says yes but doesn't go. Jesus teaches that it is the first of the sons who does the will of his father. One wonders if it was a pattern of response familiar to him. It seems to have been familiar to his mother in the conversation at Cana.

In addition to the human detail, this story is full of symbols, which John is keen for his hearers to pick up. In the Old Testament, the messianic age was often referred to in terms of a wedding feast, of God 'marrying' his people in an eternal covenant. The references to wedding feasts throughout the Gospels are about that restored relationship. And at the end of the Book of the Revelation (which is part of the same tradition as the Fourth Gospel) heaven is referred to as the wedding feast of the Lamb, the final union of Christ and the community he had come to build, which we call the Church. So the wedding at Cana points

forward too to the heavenly banquet when all will be gathered up into God, a foretaste of which we are promised each time we meet to celebrate the Eucharist.

People have found all sorts of significance in the details of this Gospel story. There are six stone water jars - the number of incompleteness, in contrast to seven, the number of perfection. The water jars were there to provide ritual purity for the wedding guests – water for washing their hands and their feet. The jars are a sign that God is doing a new thing from within the old. Jesus often takes an existing religious practice and transforms into something new – the Passover feast becomes our Holy Communion.

The amount of the wine which, following Jesus's intervention, pours out of the water jars is superabundant, both in quality and quantity. In the prophecies of the Old Testament, large quantities of wine are used to refer to the promised restoration of the people of God: 'The mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it' (Amos 9.13). John's message is that, in the new relationship with God brought about by Jesus, restoration is already happening.

And, as Christians, we cannot fail to hear the significance of the words with which the story begins: 'on the third day'. This is a story about the new relationship between God and humanity - the new covenant, the new union of God in Christ with his people, which begins with the Resurrection 'on the third day'.

Above all, this is a story about the difference that Jesus makes: a story about transformation. The water made wine is the change effected by his touch on our lives. And it affects us both as individuals and when we gather together as

his Church. This week is the Week of prayer for Christian unity, when despite our differences we focus on what unites us more than what divides us: one faith, one Church, one Lord.

Christ helps each of us to become the person God meant us to be. It's what his ministry was about. Turning the water of life into the wine of eternal life. It's important for us to remember this when we are under pressure, when we feel our resources are running dry. Especially, perhaps, in a time of pandemic.

A former Archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Gordon Lang, noted that the life of faith is about learning to make water into wine. He wrote:

> 'At Cana the wine did not simply come: the water became it. That is the divine method. When Christ came, he did not come in a new order of being: he came in flesh, as a human being. It was this real and actual human nature that he made divine. We are to follow that divine method. We are to take the water of life as we find it, and convert it into wine.'[1]

Writing a century later, Bishop John V Taylor expressed this insight in slightly different terms:

> 'If God is to be of any use to you or me, he has to be a God who stands gently alongside you, and says, 'Where shall we go from here? What shall we make of it?' You can't undo what has made you what you are. You can't undo history. But from this moment, with God you can look forward and say, 'What shall we make of this?' … It is good to remember that the child born at Bethlehem [, whose Epiphany we celebrate in this season,]

[1] *The Miracles of Jesus as the Way of Life* (1901)

reminds us that God says, ‘Let’s take it from here, and whatever comes, let’s see what we can make of it.’[2]

So as we look towards the future at this daunting time, let’s try thinking in those terms: ‘What are we going to make of this?’ And try saying to ourselves in reply: ’We are going to make water into wine.’

It’s the difference Christ made, and makes still.

Amen.

[2] The Easter God (2003)

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Second Sunday before Lent

7th February 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

The Lectionary, which sets out the readings for use in churches each Sunday, is sometimes surprising. Just when the Church starts to sound bossy, saying 'Christmas ends at Candlemas' and instructing us to take down the crib last week, the Lectionary unexpectedly gives us the Prologue to John's Gospel, the reading which many think of as the Christmas Gospel. Yet here we are on the first Sunday of what the Church calls 'ordinary time'. It might seem puzzling[i], but as we shall discover, there is never a wrong time to read the Prologue to John's Gospel.

I am indebted to Christine Portman for reminding me of a book which I had on my shelves, but which I had never actually read. She mentioned it the other day in her online reflection about the wedding at Cana. It is by Stephen Verney and the book is called *Water into Wine*. It is an extended meditation on St John's Gospel, matured (like good wine) over the course of many years' reflection. It is fairly heady stuff, and you might not want to drink it every day. But once tasted, you will remember it. Although it's impossible to do justice to it in a few minutes, here is a taster.

Verney begins his book by recalling that in the Christian tradition St John is known as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. He writes:

> 'The good news which the disciple whom Jesus loved has to tell us is about that love which he himself had experienced. It was a love which was so deeply human that he declared Jesus to be the first truly human being who has ever walked the earth, the pioneer of a new order of human society. But at the same time he believed that the love which had touched his life was the energy which had created the universe and which keeps it in being'.

In Jesus, the writer of the Fourth Gospel had come to know the very source of everything that exists, and the goal towards which everything is moving. But his good news is even more than that. Jesus called this energy of love 'my Father' and he opened up a way for us to know his Father as sons and daughters, and to become what we truly are, and to experience this love in our lives together.

Before we explore this idea in more detail, how does John set about explaining Jesus's significance? Writing in the Jewish tradition, he had the difficult task of conveying to a largely Greek readership why this man's story mattered. Unlike the Jews, the Greeks had no expectation of a Messiah. So to write in terms of that promise being fulfilled – as the Gospels of Matthew and Luke do - would not have meant much to them. Instead, the author expressed the significance of Jesus's birth in terms of the Word.

The 'Word' was a concept common to both Jewish and Greek traditions. In the Old Testament, the 'word of God' was God's way of being active, calling creation into being. Later the concept of the Word became associated with the Wisdom of God that brought the divine will to people's hearts and minds. We heard a passage from the 'Wisdom tradition' in our Old Testament reading this morning.

For the Greeks, the word (the *Logos*), was the principle of order under which the universe existed. It also gave people knowledge of truth and the ability to judge between right and wrong. Greeks were used to the idea that a greater reality lay behind this one – a world of ideal forms, glimpsed occasionally. The question that intrigued them was how to gain greater access to that deeper reality.

Ingeniously, the writer of the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel found a way of speaking about Christ's birth that was equally striking in both cultures, Jewish and Greek (and so, by implication, for the whole world): 'the Word became flesh.' It was saying that the powerful, creative force which gives order to the universe and intelligence to human beings, was to be found in a person, and if we want to understand what this Word is like, we need look no further than Jesus of Nazareth. For in his life, his teaching, his dying and rising, we will discover all that we need to know about God.

The message of these opening words of the story of Jesus is that there is a pattern of Love which expresses itself in everything that comes to be. From the beginning. When Moses asks God for his name, the reply is 'I AM'. Stephen Verney writes:

> 'In the beginning when time began, I AM already was. … The very being and glory of God is Love, and I AM is the to and fro of Love. I AM is the Love leaping from the Father to the Son, and from the Son to the Father. This dialogue or dance of Love is the reality which underlies everything in the universe ('all things came into being through' [this]), the movement of Love which John saw in Jesus, and which is seeking to come alive in us.'

'And the Word became flesh and lived among us … full of grace and truth.' In John's telling of Jesus's story, Verney notes the interplay of references to the human self (the I, the *ego*) and its encounter with the divine Love (the I AM, the

ego-eimi). In Christ, human egocentricity – which makes for a pattern of society in which people compete with, manipulate and try to control one another - is transformed into a dynamic where the ruling principle is Love, where the pattern of society is one of compassion – people giving what they really are and accepting what others are, recognising their differences and sharing their vulnerability.

Verney puts it like this: 'In Jesus the timeless truth entered time, and I AM clothed itself in a human ego. The two orders became a dialogue of Love, and as John and the disciples looked at the Son of Man letting go his human ego and receiving it back transformed, they saw the grace and the truth of I AM. … Grace means the free gift of himself which the Father is giving, … the gift of his Spirit springing out of human flesh. They saw that Jesus lifted up on the cross was giving them that free gift, and that all who see and believe now have authority to let go and forgive and love one another.'

Verney's writing seems to me to capture the essence of what all three of our readings this morning are seeking to express in their different ways. That we find in Jesus the fullest expression both of our humanity and of the divine energy which lies at the heart of things, and that to discover this is nothing less than life-giving. As John writes at the end of his Gospel: 'these [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.' (John 20.31)

The thing about the Incarnation is that it is endless, although revealed in a single life. The risen Christ who first appeared to the disciples on Easter Day is present with us now and through eternity. There is no end to Love, even though our circumstances change. There is no end to possibility, even when we feel locked down. God's purposes are endlessly renewing, endlessly creative, endlessly

forgiving, endlessly recreating. There is no right time, and no wrong time, to read the Prologue to John's Gospel. There is no right time, and no wrong time, for the Spirit of Christ to be born in us. Let it be now. For where God is active, there is no such thing as 'ordinary' time.

Amen.

[i] There is actually a simple explanation. About forty years ago, when the Alternative Service Book was introduced, the Church of England decided to liven up 'ordinary time' by introducing themes for different Sundays. The Second Sunday before Lent was designated Creation Sunday, with readings on the theme of creation. But with the introduction of Common Worship twenty years ago that idea evaporated, so Creation Sunday isn't mentioned any more. The readings are still there, though without their explanatory label.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – First Sunday of Lent

28th February 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Poor old Peter. Always getting it wrong. When your best friend calls you 'Satan' you know you're in trouble. Only a minute ago Peter was telling Jesus that his friends had understood he was the Messiah. What happened?

Mark doesn't tell us what Peter said next, just that he 'rebuked' Jesus for warning them that his forthcoming confrontation with the authorities would end in suffering and death. Peter was presumably saying this didn't have to be: 'you'll be all right, you are the Messiah, we will fight for you.' But his words must have reminded Jesus of the tempter in the wilderness, inviting him to exercise the wrong sort of power. Hence his severe reaction.

There were many pressures on Jesus to do things differently. All around him were minor insurrections against the occupying forces of the Roman Empire, notably by the Zealots, of whom Luke says that one of the twelve apostles, Simon, was a member. So there's a political dimension to the conversation with Peter. Looked at from this point of view, 'taking up your cross' means not taking the course of action of the local political and religious authorities - not being

subservient to Rome. Neither is it taking the Zealots' way of violent insurrection. It is the non-violent path of active resistance and the creation of an alternative society within the apparent dominance of Rome.

Non-violent resistance where people are oppressed is still the church's vocation – forming an alternative community that is about reconciliation, about receiving the stranger as a gift. Facing the consequences of standing for that alternative community and being prepared to suffer for it. Martin Luther King called it 'the beloved community', and he was shot for proclaiming it. Many modern martyrs who have given their lives for the Christian faith have done the same. Like them, we will never know when we may be called upon to take up the cross. We just hope we will never have to pay so high a price.

This scene in the Gospel also tells us something about ourselves. It's partly about how we face up to reality. In our Lent course, we are discussing Rowan Williams's book of reflections on *Faith, hope and love in a time of pandemic*. Some of us have been admitting to ourselves and each other how difficult we have found facing up to reality in the pandemic – clinging to the thought it may be over soon. The serial optimist Boris Johnson has just told the British people they can all go on holiday in June (or at least that's what easyJet heard from his speech last week). Last summer he said it would all be over by Christmas. There's a degree of denial everywhere, including in ourselves.

But in learning to face reality, in all aspects of our lives, we can begin to grow beyond denial and useless anger. That's another meaning of 'taking up your cross'. We are better placed to do something about the reality that faces us. What we do will differ, depending on the nature of the problem. In a pandemic,

it means taking responsible action and learning to be patient. With an addiction, it means accepting there is a problem and addressing it with appropriate help. In dealing with a dysfunctional relationship, it means having honest conversations, bringing things to a head or, if necessary, to an end. But not avoiding the reality.

What about 'denying ourselves'? Is that just about giving things up for Lent? Well, that's never a bad thing if it helps us contemplate all that Jesus gave up for us. But it's a wider concept. It's about not making ourselves the centre of everything, but learning instead to see our lives in the wider context of God in Christ. Realising there's a bigger story than our own and leaving our preoccupations with self behind to live it. Abraham did that literally, migrating in response to God's prompting, trusting what sounded like incredible promises. In doing so, he became the ancestor of faith for all of us, as Paul recognised in his Letter to the Romans. It's about believing in promise and having faith, which in turn leads to hope. Hope is what we need more than anything at the moment.

And yet we find Jesus saying, 'those who want to save their life will lose it'. That doesn't sound very hopeful. But those words tell us something else about ourselves. They ask us where we are investing our energies, our love, our resources. Do we do so in things that are eternal, or things that are temporary? It is worth spending some time during Lent making an inventory of that for ourselves. We might be surprised to find how simple God's call upon us is. The thing that is eternal is love, and everything else flows from that: the other 'fruits of the Spirit' that Paul lists elsewhere - joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5.22-23) - and more. If as individuals we can manage to focus on those qualities together, we

may end up as Martin Luther King's 'beloved community', supporting one another through thick and thin.

I was reminded of an example of this when choosing our Communion anthem today. The composer, Richard Shephard, died last weekend after a long illness. Forty years ago he lived in Salisbury, where he sang in the cathedral choir. My family were also living there at the time so I got to know him a little. Shephard's setting of Thomas Campion's poem 'Never weather beaten sail' was written in response to tragedy. A friend of his was diagnosed with an inoperable cancer and died not long afterwards, leaving a young family. Her husband was one of Shephard's colleagues. The events drew the whole cathedral community together in love and concern, Christian community at its best. Shephard was asked to write the anthem for her funeral, and it seems fitting to play it for him today.

The words, written four hundred years ago, may seem surprisingly direct to our modern ears. But if you have ever accompanied someone through a terminal illness, you may have heard or even felt a version of Campion's prayer. Yet when I heard Shephard's setting again this week, what struck me most about it was how both words and music speak of a profound hope and trust in God. They also offer a clue to how death might look from God's end of the telescope.

And it struck me that, globally, we are not doing enough of that at the moment in the face of this pandemic – holding on to the hope offered to us in God. We are daily given reminders of the need to live cautiously, fearfully, to live locked-in lives. But where are we mentally investing our energies, our love and our resources? In the things of eternity, or just the things of the next day?

If we can find it in us to invest in the things of eternity, we will live more fruitfully through what can feel like fruit-less days. When I put this anthem in the service

sheet, I initially thought it had nothing to do with the second Sunday in Lent. I now suspect it has quite a lot to do with it. For it's about how we face death and, if we can trust that God is holding the other end of the telescope, how that in turn frees us to live the gospel now. Living freely despite all the physical constraints we are under. Risking everything in service of the values that last for ever, beyond the concerns of the day. Setting our minds on divine things, not human things. And, in doing so, learning to be free.

Easter will teach us that all over again. Preparation for Easter's eternal promise is what this season of Lent is for.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Third Sunday of Lent

7th March 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

I heard a story this week of a church that had been daubed with graffiti. The writer had angrily written all over the front: 'God is dead'. Underneath, someone else had written, 'Wait …….. Happy Easter.' It's a good example of how to turn on its head a gesture designed to shock, by over-accepting it.

Jesus's gesture of 'cleansing' the Temple in our Gospel reading today was certainly designed to shock. It's often assumed his gesture was one of sudden anger, but it's also possible that it was a planned prophetic gesture – at least, the Gospel writers understood its prophetic meaning when they looked back. Jesus knew well the power of the right gesture. Riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. Kneeling down to wash his disciples' feet. Breaking bread and sharing wine and instructing his friends to remember him when they did it. He is remembered not only for his words, but also for his dramatic actions.

The Temple was the centre of things in first century Jerusalem – worship, politics and national life. Above all, it was the place where people understood that God had promised he would live among them. By the first century, the Passover festival had evolved into a celebration that lasted a whole week, turning it from

a family ritual to a national pilgrimage centred on Jerusalem. All were encouraged to make the journey to the newly expanded temple which Herod was constructing. There was a temple tax, assessed on every Jewish family in order to maintain it. Only temple currency was accepted to pay the tax – Roman coins, bearing the image of the emperor, were not allowed, but conveniently money changers were available around the Temple, at a less than generous rate of exchange. Pilgrims also wished to offer animals for sacrifice at the Passover festival. The animals had to be without blemish, so – conveniently again – it was possible to buy them on arrival rather than travel with them and risk them becoming blemished along the way.

Into this busy scene, at the busiest time of the year, strode Jesus, denouncing the money changers, the animal sellers and all that they represented – challenging not only the temple economy but the whole sacrificial system. There is actually an echo of the prophet Zechariah in the words used, for the writer of the Gospel has Jesus saying: 'Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' Zechariah had written: 'There shall no longer be any traders in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day'[1] – that is, on the day when the Lord will come to a new and restored Jerusalem. The implication is: the Lord has come, and the traders must go.

John puts the scene of the 'cleansing of the Temple' at the beginning of his Gospel. In the other three accounts it comes in the days leading up to the crucifixion. But John is saying near the outset: 'If you want to understand who this man was, you need to understand this gesture.' Like the turning of water into wine, which the scene in the Temple comes immediately after. Both these

[1] Zechariah 14.21; 14.5.

actions are referred to as ‘signs’ - signs through which people would come to believe in Jesus’s significance.

Ironically, the religious authorities, shocked by Jesus’s action, ask for just that - a ‘sign’, evidence of his authority to behave as he is doing. There follows one of those oblique conversations in which Jesus says something, it is misunderstood by those challenging him, and it is only later that his disciples understand what he meant. ‘Do you see this temple? I can rebuild it in three days.’ The religious authorities take his words literally and are outraged. But they remember the conversation, for (in the accounts of Matthew and Mark) this is exactly the charge brought against Jesus at his trial. Yet John tells us that Jesus was instead speaking metaphorically, referring to his body.

We should remember that, by the time the Gospels were written down, Herod’s Temple had been destroyed by Rome on the orders of the Emperor Nero. John is urging his readers to see that the resurrected body of Jesus is now the place of encounter between God and humanity. The presence of God in our midst is to be found not in a building, but in Christ himself and the community of his followers.

The Church still has power to make an impression on society by its gestures. Those of us above a certain age will recall Pope John Paul II criss-crossing the globe and kneeling to kiss the tarmac of each country on his arrival. It was a gesture of humility, thanksgiving and peace. As a Polish priest, appointed while the Cold War was still in progress, he embodied non-violent resistance to the Soviet regime, and they couldn’t touch him. A modern example of the power of gesture is taking the knee. Five years ago, the American footballer Colin

Kaepernick refused to stand to sing the US National Anthem before a game, saying 'I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of colour'. Instead, he went down on one knee – a profound prophetic gesture now imitated all over the world. Images speak louder than words. Who will forget the protester who stood in front of a column of tanks leaving Tiananmen Square in 1989? Or Alan Kurdi, aged four, on the beach of a Greek island – the tragic image of the migrations of the last decade?

Out of all the dramatic images associated with Jesus, the Cross was the most shocking one of all, as Paul points out in his Letter to the church in Corinth which we heard in our Epistle today. Nowadays we tend to focus on the pain of the crucifixion, but what Paul is referring to is the utter shame that it represented. A naked man (there would have been no loincloth) with no control over his limbs and body. It was how slaves were executed, those considered lowest in society - as a spectacle to spread fear. Yet Paul is saying that this is power and this is wisdom and this is God. It's one of the mysteries of the Christian faith how a shameful and undignified picture of agonising failure and powerlessness became one of the most powerful symbols in the world.

Two thousand years later, last Wednesday a member of our online community gave our weekly Lent talk, 'Why faith matters'. She spoke of how, suddenly finding herself a refugee following a coup in her country of origin, she was sustained by the sign of the Cross through the long years it took her to be granted a right of residence in Europe and a place, finally, to call home again.

Two thousand years later, our community of faith faces a challenge: how do we witness to the sign of the Cross now? Our Lent course is helping us explore what

it means to the body of Christ in these times of disruption, and our planning for the chaplaincy over the next few years will be an opportunity to open ourselves up to the possibilities.

In doing that, we will find continuity through our Old Testament reading, in following the commandments of God which Jesus summarised in two sentences: love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbour as yourselves. We live in a suffering world in need of healing, in need of the love Christ begged his followers to share. The commandments were given to the people of Israel in the wilderness to teach them how to live well in community. Lent is a time of wilderness. Let us use it well.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Good Friday

2nd April 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

After those words ('This is the Passion of the Lord') the prayer book adds: 'No response is made'. So it may seem ironic that, at the place where language falls silent, the next word written in the prayer book is: 'Sermon'. How can anyone put into words what has just happened? A parish priest once lamented to me the fact that his church offered tea and hot cross buns after the service on Good Friday. All he wanted was to go away and be alone, in silence.

What is it about this story that silences us? And what is it about this story that is so compelling? It is sometimes said of the Titanic disaster that one reason why its story is so often retold is that people in each generation wonder what they would have done if they had been there on that night. I suspect that is one reason why the Passion narrative is still so compelling, two thousand years on. So much of human behaviour is laid bare. The best and the worst. Mary comforts, Judas betrays, Peter affirms then denies, Joseph seeks, Nicodemus follows in secret, Thomas doubts, Caiaphas abuses power, so does Herod, so does Pilate. The disciples run away in fear. Jesus is left alone. All those involved in his death had choices. Yet people talk of the domino effect of human

wrongdoing. If you line up dominoes in a particular way and push one, the others all fall. The same is true of human sinfulness. We have seen it many times, for it is often the way human conflict starts. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo in 1914. The shooting down of a plane carrying Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana in 1994. Dominoes falling in a deadly acceleration of violence, apparently unstoppable.

The last days of Jesus, which we have been following in our services each day this week, are of universal significance. As the spiritual writer Erik Kolbell has noted, they contain all the themes of guilt and forgiveness, compassion and injustice, courage and cowardice, loyalty and betrayal, and the power of life to prevail over death – themes as old as civilisation yet as relevant today as they were when the Gospels were written.[1] We cannot live our lives without them. One theme that runs through the whole Passion narrative is accountability. Everyone involved has agency, and yet we watch in awe and dread as the pieces fall into place, like dominoes.

Another reason for the enduring fascination of the Cross is that it is the place where we learn who we are and who God is. For the Cross reveals both the depth of our brokenness and the depth of divine love. Jesus could have saved his life but gave it up, and there is no greater expression of love in the face of rejection than to die for those who have done the rejecting. God is revealed as saying: 'Even when you turn your back on me, I love you. Even when you pierce my hands, I love you. Even when you betray me, deny me, doubt me or abandon me, I love you.' As the nails were driven in, Jesus said 'Father, forgive.' That forgiveness breaks the cycle of violence around him. Christ is the domino that

[1] Erik Kolbell, *Were you there?* (2005)

does not fall, stopping all those that come after from falling too. We have seen it happen in our lifetimes, often inspired by Christ himself. In those who have found it in themselves to forgive the very people who have caused them to suffer - Nelson Mandela; Corrie ten Boom, the Dutch resistance worker; Gordon Wilson, whose daughter was killed in a terrorist attack in Northern Ireland. Breaking the cycle of violence. The courage they showed is transformational.

Being forgiven can be transformational too. In our services of Compline this week we have reflected particularly on two characters in the Passion story: Judas and Peter. It struck me all over again that they mark an essential difference in the outcome of the story. Both betray Jesus in their different ways. Yet Judas finds himself unable to live with the consequences, while Peter encounters the risen Christ, who in John's Gospel account offers him the opportunity to reverse his three denials when they share breakfast on the beach: 'Simon, son of Jonas, do you love me?' And it struck me again this week that if the Christian faith stands for anything, it is that nothing and no one is beyond redemption. There may be a long road of despair and repentance. The complicated path towards forgiveness and reconciliation may take a lifetime to travel. If others have been harmed, the processes of law and justice may need to be involved. And if we ourselves have been harmed, the difficulty of forgiving should never be underestimated. But the possibility of redemption must always exist, because redemption for the whole of humanity was won on Calvary. That is our faith.

We also have Jesus's own teaching in the parable of the mote and the beam ('Do not judge, so that you may not be judged'[2]), and his response to the woman

[2] Matthew 7.1.

taken in adultery whose story we heard on Ash Wednesday, of whom Christ said, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone'[3]. So, if you were about to think 'yes, but…', first think on Christ. As Christ's body, we stand for the mending of what has been broken, however many pieces there are. When the penitent thief said 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom', he was not simply asking not to be forgotten, but also to be 're-membered', for all the broken pieces of his life to be put back together, to be refashioned as God would have him be. No one is beyond that promise. It lies at the heart of the Easter message.

But, for now, we wait at the foot of the Cross, aware of the weight of Christ's suffering, aware of the cost of human sinfulness, aware of the terrible price paid by Jesus in revealing the fullness of the divine love. And, deep within our brokenness, we give thanks for all that he has done.

The reason why the Passion story is so compelling is that it does not just show God's hand in Christ's destiny, but in ours too. With every action we take or refuse to take, with every opportunity for compassion or commitment taken or missed, we are either following the will of God or rejecting it. If we profess that God was revealed in Christ, then we have no choice but to live our lives in response. Like the people in the story of Good Friday, the good, the bad and the indifferent. They had no choice but to play a part in the unfolding of salvation history. Neither do we.

Amen.

[3] John 8.7.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Easter Vigil – 3rd April 2021

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!
Let this be our greeting throughout the Easter season. Let Christ's resurrection shine in our lives. Let Easter joy overflow into our homes.

Filled with nostalgia for unrestricted Easter celebrations in pre-pandemic times, I opened Leon Tolstoy's last novel, *Resurrection,* and read his delightful account of the Easter midnight liturgy: "Everything was festive, solemn, bright, and beautiful: the priest in his silver cloth vestments with gold crosses; the deacon, the clerk and chanter in their silver and gold surplices; […] the merry tunes of the hymns […]; and the continual blessing of the people by the priests, who held candles decorated with flowers."

In the Orthodox church, as the bells toll, the light is passed from candle to candle, there is the Paschal Greeting: "Christ is risen!" and the singing of the festal hymn of the Resurrection:

Christ is risen from the dead,
trampling down death by death,
and upon those in the tombs
bestowing life!

- they reach their crescendo. With candles lit, the faithful spill out into the streets and carry the light back to their homes, as a blessing and a promise to have their lives illuminated through Christ's resurrection.

This is something I miss in our online Easter celebration, the moment when someone turns to pass me the light, or when I pass it myself to someone else, the moment when I see someone's face, perhaps unknown to me, lit up by the light of the Resurrection.

But let us not forget that Easter began with terror and amazement. Women who had followed Jesus in Galilee and cared for his needs, who had witnessed his humiliation and torture on the cross, who had witnessed where his body had been laid – after the pain and bewilderment of Good Friday, and the silence and confusion of Saturday, these women were the first to hear the Easter message: Christ is risen! They have come to seek the crucified Jesus in a place of death and defeat, and yet, in the early hours of a new day, they hear how everything has been changed forever: Christ is risen!

Yet this is not a conclusion, a happy ending to the story as Mark tells it – it is only the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1:1). The Gospel story will continue to unfold until Christ's second coming.

For now, the women and the disciples are called to embrace the joy and freedom of God's new creation – and yet this is not an easy life path. This path could take the disciples back to Galilee. It is a promise, and a challenge, as well.

For Galilee is the disciples' home, the place where they had lived with their families, where they had worked and prayed, where they had celebrated and mourned, where they had mixed with Gentiles (Matthew 4:15). It is the place where they had been first called by Jesus. It is the place of Jesus' ministry: it is in Galilee that he proclaimed the Kingdom of God, preached good news to the poor and release of the captives, he taught by word and deed, welcomed children, he healed the sick, consoled the broken-hearted, he shared meals with those who were rejected and forgave sinners.

"After I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee": this is Jesus' promise to his disciples (Mark 14:28). And just as he walks ahead of them, he walks ahead of us in life and in death.

He goes before us to Galilee, the place of everyday life and he wants us to continue the story that we have heard, he wants us to bring hope there. It is in our Galilee that we can experience the resurrected Christ, in every place and every moment. He meets us there to bring forgiveness and hope, healing and peace, new and abundant life. He equips us to live resurrected lives and to continue the story of God's redemption of the world.

On this night, still bearing the wounds of his suffering, the risen Christ comes to us in glory. His enduring light, passed in faith from hand to hand, can overcome

all darkness. It is offered to all, no one shall return to their Galilee without it, as we should live as resurrection people and bearers of the Easter light, as we should spread hope and love in a broken and fearful world, witnessing through our life to Christ our Risen Lord and Saviour.

For this, we need to recover the reverent awe of God's presence among us in our crucified and risen Lord, who goes before us. For this, we need to regain infectious Easter joy and take it to our Galilee. It is Christ's as he reveals the Father's love to us, his joy to be the Resurrection and the Life, to dwell among us in his Spirit, his joy to be for us our daily bread. This night, we are all invited to share in this joy.

Let us, in the words of John Chrysostom, the 4th century bishop and preacher: "Enjoy this fair and radiant festival. […] Rich and poor, let us with one another exult. […] Let all enjoy the feast of faith, receive all the riches of goodness.[…] Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice.
Christ is risen, and life flourishes." (*Paschal Homily*)

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Easter Day

4th April 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

When you think of the hundreds of millions of Christians celebrating Easter today, it is striking to reflect that the resurrection took place when no one was present and that its immediate aftermath was witnessed by only a handful of people. In the Gospel account of John, it is Mary Magdalene who is first on the scene, followed at her invitation by Peter and 'the disciple whom Jesus loved', usually taken to mean John himself. At its origin the whole thing appears to have been on the smallest of scales.

Yet the impact of those earliest witnesses was immense, like the parables Jesus told of tiny seeds bearing much fruit. Notwithstanding the persecutions they suffered and even the risk of death, these early followers went on telling the story, until finally it was written down as the original eye-witnesses were reaching the end of their lives. At which point the Gospel writers began to record how 'early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed'. And how that matter-of-fact sentence marks a turning point in the history of the world.

Some have said that the current pandemic will be seen as a turning point. The world is living through a crisis that is testing what people think about the fundamentals of human existence. One thing that has dominated the last year, underlying the sense of anxiety that has gripped many communities and especially the media, is the fear of death. In a society where, in contrast to previous centuries, Christian faith is no longer a given in many people's sense of identity, do we as followers of Christ have anything useful to say? I believe we do.

Last night we lit our Easter candle, which today we brought into church. It witnesses to the power of the risen Christ to bring us out of darkness into light. The truth of Easter is that, ultimately, love is stronger than hate and life is stronger than death – words which we will hear sung in our anthem this morning. And, in Christ, the God who shows his power in creating and re-creating us invites us to trust him in life and in death. That is the source of our Easter joy.

The earliest Christians celebrated that joy by enacting a symbol of death and resurrection in baptism. Immersing themselves into a river or pool, their rising out of the water symbolized a movement from death to life. The apostle Paul found the experience so life-changing that he wrote about it in terms of being reborn: 'If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation.'[1] Their understanding of Christ's resurrected body – what Paul would elsewhere call a 'spiritual body'[2] - was that it was no longer under the dominion of death. However far beyond our rational understanding that may be, they were convinced that here was the

[1] 2 Corinthians 5.17
[2] 1 Corinthians 15.44

evidence and the promise that human beings, created by a God who is love, cannot ultimately be destroyed by death but are created for life with God for ever. As Michael Mayne, the former Dean of Westminster, wrote, this is the 'strange and powerful claim' on which the Christian faith rests.[3]

It also means that for those who believe that God is like Jesus described God to be, everything is changed. The darkness will still be dark, but the Christlike God is with us in it, and beyond the grief and pain we experience, deeper and more lasting is God's unchanging love. As Mayne puts it, 'Human wickedness and evil are not diminished, but compassion and self-giving are stronger. The festering poison of resentment pales in the light of costly forgiveness. … Even the death of the body … is seen to have no power to erase the human spirit made in God's likeness'.[4] For the mystery of Easter is about God's creative power, which we see in the natural world around us every day as well as in the miracle of the human body. What God does in raising Christ from the dead is as powerful a creative act as the one with which the world was called into being.

For Jesus's earliest followers, the resurrection was the point at which the whole story of his life and death made sense, and they saw it had implications for the whole of humanity. Looking back, they could see the creative purposes of God, culminating in this moment. The risen Christ and Mary Magdalene. Two figures. A man and a woman in a garden, just like the first time. The new creation breaking through and becoming visible.

Where I live, at this time of year the sun rises through a gap in the hills and the whole valley is suddenly flooded with golden light. Easter is like that. In its light everything we believe about life and death is illuminated and changed. Some

[3] Michael Mayne, *Alleluia is our Song* (2018).
[4] Michael Mayne, *Alleluia is our Song*, p 29.

people manage to live their whole lives in the light of its joy. Living life in the dimension of the eternal, rejoicing as the eternal breaks through into the present moment. No longer with a sense of life and capacity gradually reducing, but a journey towards something more wonderful than we are able to express or comprehend. Most of us muddle along with a sense that lies somewhere between the old and the new creation, occasionally infused with wonder and joy. Increasingly I have come to value, as much as the forty days of Lent, the fifty days of the Easter season that lie beyond it. For Easter doesn't end on Tuesday morning when the world goes back to work. It is with us for ever.

On Good Friday, we saw how the crucifixion assures us that our sinfulness cannot keep us from God. The resurrection assures us that the same is true of death. The empty tomb testifies to the strength of divine love. It is the ultimate promise of salvation, overcoming our greatest fear - the fear of extinction - and the thought that death will have the last word. God is a creator who calls us into being, who knows us before we were born and through every moment of our lives (as the writer of Psalm 139 understood so well). As Erik Kolbell writes, the one who knew us before we knew ourselves does not abandon us when our lifespan is over. Just as an unborn child knows nothing about the world they will soon inhabit, so we know nothing about the dimension into which we will be born at our death. But we believe that the God who has power to call us out of nothingness into life also has the power to call us out of death into new life.[5] That is the Christian hope.

Last night our curate Roxana read the ancient hymn known as the Exsultet, sung during the night that leads into Easter Day. We hesitated which version to use

[5] Erik Kolbell, *Were you there?* (2005).

and finally decided on the traditional words, which are rich and sonorous and speak across time. But the modern version contains some powerful words too. It states so clearly the Christian hope in the face of death that I will end by quoting from it. And it seems to me that, in a society that has often seemed paralysed by the fear of death for more than a year now, it does represent something more than useful which followers of Christ have to say:

> This is the night when God says 'No' to death,
> That final boundary to human life,
> That door we once feared to approach.
> This is the night God swallows death,
> Absorbs its sting into God's own life,
> Strips death of all power,
> Renews our fainting hearts.
> …
> And so, our God, in the joy of this Feast,
> Receive our offering of praise.'

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Easter Day – 4th April 2021

Eglise Sacré-Coeur, Oppède

The Revd John Smith

It is quite a challenge to give a talk on the resurrection of Jesus. To begin with we have four accounts of His resurrection with each of the gospels differing in the details of what happened and then we have different translations of those gospels. Would you believe that the app I use for my daily bible reading gives me a choice of sixty-one translations?

Some people have used the differences in the gospel accounts to argue that none of the accounts can be believed but I believe that these differences in the accounts argue for accepting the legitimacy of the accounts. It is well known that if you ask four people to relate their accounts of the same scene they always differ in the detail. It would be very suspicious of some sort of collusion if all the accounts agreed. And some of the details are exquisite in the authenticity they lend to the accounts. For example, in our gospel this morning we have the detail noted only in John's account that the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, was not lying with the other linen wrappings but it was rolled up, folded in a place by itself. In Mark's account we are told not only that there was an angel but he was seated on the right.

We could concentrate on the differences if we are set on disproving the fact of Jesus' resurrection but then we cannot overlook the facts that all the gospels agree on:

- Jesus died and was buried
- Several women went to the tomb very early in the morning of the first day of the week
- They found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty of Jesus' body
- An angel spoke to them
- The women fled from the tomb
- The disciples were not prepared for his death and were confused about his resurrection

And though not included in all accounts of the resurrection in all four gospels, all the gospels talk about Jesus being alive post-resurrection and appearing to many.

But let us now look at our reading this morning from the gospel of John. And I should warn you that John is the most difficult of the four gospels to understand. This is because there always seems to be a second meaning to all that John writes. His gospel is often referred to as the spiritual gospel because he often has a spiritual meaning behind the earthly meaning. He seems to be ambiguous if not enigmatic on purpose. So, with that spiritual health warning, let's go.

John's resurrection scene opens with Mary Magdalene on her way to the tomb on the first day of the week while it was still dark. This motif of darkness and light runs throughout John's gospel with darkness meaning death and the light meaning life and particularly eternal life. So, Mary sets out in the dark headed for the light. Does that give you a sense of how John writes? John does not tell us that there are maybe four or more other women with Mary. We only learn that Mary was not alone when she refers to 'we' rather than 'I' later on. On reaching the tomb Mary and her companions discover that the stone covering the entrance of the tomb has been removed. But oddly, we are not told that Mary looks into the tomb. Instead, she runs to tell Peter and John what has happened. She does not tell them what she has seen, that the stone to the tomb has been removed or the tomb is empty, but she says "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." An assumption on Mary's part and a wrong assumption at that.

At least that got Peter and John's attention for their response was immediate. They high-tailed it to the tomb with John reaching the tomb first but for some reason he also did not enter the tomb. He looked into the tomb and saw the linen lying there that Christ's body had been wrapped in. When Peter arrived, we can imagine, true to his character, Peter elbows John out of the way and dives into the tomb. John follows Peter into the tomb and we are told that "John saw and believed". We can assume that he saw the loose linens lying there but we are left to imagine what he believed. Did he believe what Mary had told them that someone had taken or stolen the body of Jesus? Grave robbing was a common occurrence in those days. John could clearly see that the body was gone but if it had been stolen why had the thief or thieves carefully folded the linen on Jesus's head? Or did John have a sudden revelation inspired by the Holy Spirit that Jesus had truly risen from the dead? If he had had this revelation,

why did he not tell Peter and Mary Magdalene particularly given the stress that Mary was experiencing? We will return to this later but if this is a mystery, the two things that we are told next are even bigger mysteries. First, John writes that they did not understand the scripture that said Jesus would rise from the dead – nor, we might add, that must include what they had heard Jesus himself say on more than one occasion. And to cap it all they then left the tomb and went home. Not to one home so that they could discuss the meaning of what they had seen but to their separate homes. Weren't they curious as to what had happened? Were they still too fearful to be seen asking questions? Were they so disappointed in the shattering of their dream on calvary that they had decided that it was all over?

I have to say in parenthesis that the men didn't distinguish themselves well from the trial of Jesus through his crucifixion to his resurrection. Judas betrayed him, Peter denied him and all of the disciples (apart from John) deserted him at his crucifixion. We have to do better guys!

If the guys had given up, Mary certainly had not. In her grief and sadness, she looked into the tomb through her tears and there saw two angels, one of whom asked why she was weeping. You would have thought it was obvious to an angel, but the angels do not have the chance of further conversation for Mary turned, probably to leave herself, only to see a man who she thought was the gardener. And then we have this wonderful moment when Mary recognises Jesus; when He says her name "Mary". In that moment, she came to know that her world had changed forever. She had experienced Good Friday, the horrible and violent death of Jesus Christ, the dashing of all of her hopes, the crushing of her faith. And she had experienced the silence of Saturday, a day of grief and mourning. On this day she had come to the tomb, seeking solace, perhaps to say a last goodbye to the friend and teacher she had known and loved, and instead her world was transformed, changed forever. To bring this scene to an end Jesus says to Mary go and tell my brothers and sisters, meaning all my disciples, not that I am risen and I am alive, but that I am leaving you. My work on earth is complete.

There is a lot in this second half of the story that we could reflect on but time does not permit. Instead, I want to go back to that puzzling verse "John saw and believed" for our belief is the very thing that the resurrection of Jesus calls into question. It is possible at this point that John and perhaps Peter too were persuaded of the fact of the resurrection, that it had indeed happened. They maybe believed that Jesus had risen from the dead but because they did not

know the Scripture, that Jesus must rise again from the dead, they did not understand the meaning of the resurrection. Knowing the fact of the resurrection is an important start, but not enough. We need also to know the meaning and the importance of Jesus' resurrection. Here are a few things that the resurrection means.

The resurrection means that Jesus was confirmed to be the Son of God.

· The resurrection means that we have assurance of our own resurrection. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, God will bring with Him those who believe in Him.

· The resurrection means that God has an eternal plan for these bodies of ours.

· The resurrection means that Jesus has a continuing ministry for he ever lives to make intercession for those who come to God through Him.

· The resurrection means that Christianity and its God are completely different, unique among world religions.

· The resurrection proves that though it looked like Jesus died on the cross as a common criminal, He actually died as a sinless man, out of love and self-sacrifice to bear the guilt of our sin. If the death of Jesus on the cross was the payment for our sin, the resurrection was the receipt, showing that the payment was perfect, fully sufficient in the sight of God the Father.

Every year I hear someone ask "when will Easter come this year?" If you hear that asked next year you can answer Easter will come when God calls your name, and you hear his voice and respond in faith. Which leads me to ask, has God called your name? Have you responded in faith? Has Easter come for you?

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Second Sunday of Easter – 11th April 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

We all have scars, some visible, some invisible. Every scar can tell a story, a funny one or a painful one, a story of defeat or one of victory, a story we are proud of and ready to share or one we are ashamed of. A scar is a visible reminder of a wound one has incurred. A scar can reveal something about who we are.

Today's Gospel reading begins with a scarred community: denial, cowardice, insecurity, fear, unbelief, confusion – these are only some of the scars that Jesus' disciples bear on the day of his resurrection. They have heard from Mary Magdalene that the tomb is empty and that she has seen the Lord. Yet their wounds make them silent and blind to what lies outside their community. A wounded community becomes locked-in.

The risen Christ is not thwarted by their fearfully locked doors: he comes to be with his disciples, he shows them his pierced hands and side, and has a mission for them: "As my Father has sent me, so I send you.", and he breathes on them the Holy Spirit. Those who are ashamed of their wounds, bereft of hope, whose lives have become meaningless, receive forgiveness, grace and peace.

They can now proclaim the Easter message, "We have seen the Lord!". They eagerly share with Thomas, who arrives at the end of the day, the news of their visitation by the risen Christ. And yet, a week later, the disciples still remain huddled behind locked doors. Their joy has been short-lived. Have they forgotten the mission they have received from Jesus? We would like their story to reach a turning point and to see them giving a response. Someone or something has to trigger them into action!

Thomas finds unconvincing the story the disciples have told him. Perhaps he cannot understand why their pattern of life remains unchanged. So he asks for evidence that their encounter with the Risen One has been real.

How embarrassing! He is not merely a late comer, but also a doubter. Artwork since the early Middle-Ages portrays him as obstinately putting his hand into Jesus' wounded side – he wants nothing less than physical evidence of the resurrection. He is also quite often represented as a very young man. Long before the days of James Fowler's theory of seven stages of faith development, the searching, questioning faith has been associated with youth, weakness, immaturity. It was considered to be similar to a childhood disease or an adolescent disorder, rather unavoidable, and something to get rid of by all means. Many of us know, as parents, as educators, that teenagers' doubts and questions can be rather difficult to deal with.

Last year, I had a surprising close encounter with a young and questioning Thomas. It happened as I was visiting a Leonardo da Vinci exhibition. The display in the first room had as its focal point a statue of Christ and St Thomas by Andrea Verrocchio – a statue I had seen on several occasions, but never so closely. It was called "The Incredulity of St Thomas". The artist has prodigiously transposed the living interaction of Jesus and Thomas in the immobility of the metal. At the geometric centre of the artwork is the wound of the Risen One. The movements of the two figures either radiate from it or converge on it. Thomas's body is caught in an upward spiral, twisted and arched by the momentum that carries him towards Christ's pierced side. Christ raises his arm in a gesture of invitation and blessing, and so offers his wound to Thomas's sight. The young man contemplates the stigmata and does not touch it. His smile shows that he is welcomed into the peace which Christ has brought.

Thomas receives his brightness from Christ, who "is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1.5). In their exchange of glances, Thomas's inner light is liberated, as he receives Christ's blessing.

It seems that for Leonardo, who was working in Verrocchio's workshop at the time when this statue was crafted, the 'encounter' with "Thomas's incredulity" was life-changing. This interaction between light and shadow became the very material of space in his paintings. I dare say that Thomas was a kindred spirit, an inspiring figure for Leonardo: never content with other people's answers and experiences, wanting to have a closer look at all that life can offer, wanting to know things for himself, asking questions others don't dare to whisper.

Yes, Thomas is not so much a doubter as a questioner, an enquirer. It is true that he asks to see the risen Jesus, but let us not forget that the other disciples have already been allowed to see him. Thomas desires a beautiful thing – a living

encounter with the Saviour. He might have grasped that resurrection can only come out of suffering, and that the scars inflicted by the world are part of Christ's story. The risen Lord bears the wounds that show he is not a stranger to human suffering. In the Resurrection, Christ's scars become part of our story, and our scars become part of God's story in our lives.

Don't try to picture Thomas probing with his finger the wound on Jesus' side. Verrocchio does not try to elucidate the mystery of the encounter. Remember that, in John's gospel, Jesus asks Thomas if he believes having seen the risen One. The invitation he has addressed to Thomas was not one to touch the body of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth, yet the body of the resurrected Christ. How could he touch a wound that, as Julian of Norwich says, is large enough for all humankind to rest in it in peace and love? The mystery of this wounded body is too great for us to grasp. The Church does not explain it, yet she does proclaim it: the body of Christ, broken for us.

The body of Christ is not only the consecrated wafer, or perhaps the Church. It encompasses the whole of humankind. It encompasses the whole universe. Yet it is a wounded body. When having our communion, whether sacramental or spiritual, we share in a broken bread, in a broken body.

As he desires to get to know this wounded body, Thomas opens himself to Christ's presence in his life and becomes a confessor. We have already heard the many titles for Jesus which the fourth Gospel opens with: the Lamb of God, the Son of God, Rabbi, Messiah, King of Israel, the Son of Man. The climax is reached with Thomas's proclamation: "My Lord and my God", words of adoration and reverence, the highest Christological confession in John's Gospel. It is much more than a doctrinal confession, it is an affirmation of trust and relationship: "**my** Lord and **my** God".

Resurrection is a relationship with Christ that will never be broken, that will never know separation. Yet how can we enter this relationship, how can we give our testimony to the resurrected Christ if we do not accept his invitation to be truly part of his body – resurrected and yet still wounded? Let us not stay locked in, let us not avert our eyes from the wounds the world bears – we may not be able to heal them, but we can at least suffer with Christ's body, experience compassion in our own bodies, in our own lives. Without compassion, how could we say "my Lord and my God"?

Thomas's story is an invitation to trust that the risen One will keep coming to us, wherever we are, regardless of the doors we lock. An invitation to dare to ask him questions, to be honest about our fears, and to yearn for experiencing more of the living Christ. He will reveal himself to us through his wounds and give us life in God's abundance and eternity.

Thomas's story is a story of faith that needs the freedom to doubt. Without this freedom, faith becomes preoccupied with a repetition of credal formulas, instead of keeping the doors wide open to welcome the Risen Lord.

Young and less young – let us be enquirers like Thomas, let us be on a journey, on a quest. Let us not stop asking God questions. Let us ask him boldly. Let us ask him joyfully.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 4th Sunday of Easter

25th April 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

One of religious art's favourite images is of Christ as the Good Shepherd. On this, the fourth Sunday of Easter, the readings are always about it, including the twenty-third Psalm. It's known as Good Shepherd Sunday.

We might think that those words would have lost some of their force, written as they were for a rural society in which shepherds guided and fed their flock, knew each by name, searched for any that strayed and defended them if necessary with their lives. But the image is still a powerful symbol of Jesus's self-sacrificing love.

Jesus's words 'I am the good shepherd' are part of the series of sayings in John's Gospel which begin with the words 'I am': 'I am the bread of life', 'I am the true vine', 'I am the light of the world'. In using the phrase he identifies himself with the God of Moses, whose name is 'I AM', or *Yahweh* (a name so holy that in the Jewish tradition it was never spoken, but instead a circumlocution was used - *Elohim*, translated in English as 'Lord', or in French 'l'Eternel'). So the words 'I am' confirmed to the first hearers of this Gospel Jesus's commitment to the purposes and work of God, and his closeness to the one he called Father.

The ‘good’ shepherd is one who is not merely competent, but ‘good’ in the sense of consistently giving in love and service, committed to the care of the flock, contrasted with the ‘hired hands’ who are invested in themselves and their own security. It’s a poignant reminder to the church today - both individually and as an institution we need to ask ourselves: in all that we do, are we aiming to be good, or simply competent?

In looking for a picture for the front of today’s service sheet I came across a painting by Pieter Brueghel the Younger entitled The Good Shepherd. It shows a shepherd lying on the ground, who has been knocked over by a vicious-looking wolf about to sink its teeth into his neck. The sheep are scattering into the woods behind. It’s the opposite of the sort of pastoral picture you usually find. Instead it is shocking, violent, urgent. When we read reports of a natural disaster or terrorist attack, we often see two basic types of response: those whose instinct for self-preservation and survival makes them run for cover, and those who run towards the crisis to see how they can help. This short Gospel passage refers no less than five times to the shepherd laying down his life for the sheep. It is picked up in our Epistle today: ‘We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.’ And the writer of the First Letter of John points out that faith in action is the only sort of faith that is authentic: ‘How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?’

There’s another echo of Christ laying down his life for those he loves in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, when Peter and John are called to account for how they have healed a lame beggar on their way into the temple. Peter looks back into the story of Israel, in which God had founded the kingdom not

on any of Jesse's tall and powerful sons but on David, the youngest and weakest. He quotes Psalm 118 which describes the choosing of David with the words, 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone'. Peter identifies the rejected stone as Christ, in whose crucifixion he was rejected by the builders, yet in whose resurrection he had become the cornerstone of forgiveness and eternal life.

So the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd, like the Gospel as a whole, is not all gentle and pastoral. But it *is* authentic and real, something we can base our life on and be strengthened by when facing down life's difficulties. The cornerstone is the one that holds everything together when everything else seems in danger of falling apart.

The image of the shepherd is one reason why Psalm 23 is often read in times of distress. The Psalm is actually full of images, for it is about how God relates to us at different times in our lives, good and bad – in green pastures (normal life), still waters (our times of refreshment, the times we have felt fully alive, time spent with our loved ones), right pathways (the times we have had to take difficult decisions) as well as the valley of the shadow of death (where many in the world feel they have been over the last year). All the stages of what it means to be human, which Christ shared with us. Throughout our lives God is present to us, faithful to us, and we can never be separated from his goodness and mercy, whatever happens to us and around us. Psalm 23 was written in response to an experience of exile, when the people of Israel saw a face of God they hadn't seen before, a God who suffered out of love. They felt closer to him in their hardship than they had in the time of plenty.

Perhaps it's that which brings people back to this Psalm, over and over again. A few years ago I had a friend who had to spend eight months in hospital in London. He was admitted to hospital after a stroke and, a few weeks later, was diagnosed with cancer. He was French and spoke almost no English, so he found it virtually impossible to communicate with the hospital staff. Whenever I visited him one of the few things that would bring him real solace was saying the words together of Psalm 23: 'L'Eternel est mon berger'.

I was reminded of this last week when I attended online the launch of a new book by Claire Gilbert, the Director of the Westminster Abbey Institute, called *Miles to go before I sleep* – a quotation from the poet Robert Frost. The book takes the form of a diary, written originally in emails to her family and friends, about the experience of being diagnosed in her early 50s with an incurable blood cancer and given a life expectancy of ten years provided she submitted to a gruelling set of treatments lasting two and a half years. At the book launch she was interviewed by her publisher, and both of them acknowledged the raw emotion which the book contains, but somehow the launch was one of the most uplifting hours I have spent in the whole of the last year.

There were some memorable one-liners, such as when Claire said of being in hospital, 'You are in hell but attended by angels', or when asked about her faith said 'I wouldn't say I believe in God but somehow I can't not believe in God', and 'I haven't solved the problem of evil but I am confronting it'. The most moving extract was her description of going into a barber's shop to have her head shaved once she began to lose her hair during the first course of treatment. She was looked after by a Kurdish barber who treated her with deep compassion, but she emerged from his shop so filled with compassion for the suffering he

had described of his own people that it had put her own ordeal into a different perspective. She wasn't remotely pious, yet the whole conversation was shot through with the kind of authentic faith that pervades the twenty-third Psalm. 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.' The phrase I was left thinking of at the end of the evening was Paul's comment in his Letter to the Romans that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ – death, life, angels, rulers, things present, things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, not anything else in all creation. Nothing.

'L'Eternel est mon berger.' Thanks be to God.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 5th Sunday of Easter

2nd May 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

It seems particularly apt that our first reading set by the Lectionary today should be the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. It's one of the most vivid passages in the New Testament and, in every generation, throws down the gauntlet to the Church about its attitudes to inclusion.

Almost a year ago I offered a reflection at this service ten days after George Floyd died under police arrest in Minneapolis. We meet again today, ten days after Derek Chauvin, the policeman who had knelt on his neck in the course of that arrest, was convicted for his murder. Yet if any of us might have thought that the kind of racism which the events in Minneapolis brought into focus belonged to another culture and context, we meet this morning conscious that the last ten days have shone a spotlight on the Church of England's own record on racism, particularly in the report from the Archbishops' Anti-Racism Task Force that was set up this time last year, in which that record was found grievously wanting. Writing of the sin of racism, the Task Force noted: 'Racial sin disfigures God's image in each one of us. Racial sin dehumanises people by taking away their fundamental God-given human dignity.'

And if that weren't enough, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, with which we have a close relationship here in Marseille through the local War cemetery, has in the last ten days also been the subject of a report into its discriminatory treatment of different ethnic groups a century ago. A reminder that discrimination happens even among the dead.

All these events remind us of the presence, and the constant risk, of unconscious bias in public and private life: the bias that operates in our unconscious minds when we make decisions, and which is revealed in the ways we recruit, promote, include or exclude. Each one of us operates with a degree of bias that is the product of our hopes, fears and prejudices, and we need a lot of self-awareness in order to counter it effectively.

The imperative to do so is stated in our Epistle this morning, from the first Letter of John. The two great commandments which Christ gave us - to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbours as ourselves - are actually inseparable. Unless we love our neighbour, we cannot say that we love God. The problem is that, both as societies and as church, we have shown time and again that we are not good at embracing human diversity.

And it doesn't stop at ethnicity: unconscious bias affects many different aspects of human diversity. Ask anyone with a disability who is a churchgoer. The Church of England's record on including women in its ministry has been fraught with foot-dragging, opt-outs and an acceptance that in some quarters has been grudging at best. For people who are LGBT+, significant parts of the Church remain openly hostile to them, at a time when Western society as a whole has come to accept them as part of human diversity and therefore entitled to the

same rights, freedoms and responsibilities as everyone else. Is it cause for wonder that so many people under the age of fifty have come to regard the Church of England as a quaint irrelevance or, worse, a place that will be unkind to you if you belong to one or more minority groups?

Into this mix the Lectionary puts the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. It is an almost comically exaggerated reminder of how radical the Gospel's demands are in our response to human diversity, for in Jesus's time this individual would have been an outsider for a whole host of reasons. The Acts of the Apostles begins by recording Jesus's parting instruction to his disciples that they are to witness to him in 'all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1.8). Ethiopia was regarded as 'the ends of the earth', where the map ran out. Eunuchs were often employed in positions of trust by ruling families, as their sexual status meant they were not considered a threat in proximity to royal women. This one was no exception - a court official in charge of the Queen of Ethiopia's treasury. Yet for all the trust placed in them by royalty, eunuchs were excluded by the religious authorities. The Book of Deuteronomy (23.1) stated that eunuchs could not 'be admitted to the assembly of the Lord'.

But this person seems to have been drawn to God, interested in faith, and the text notes that he was on his way back from 'worshipping' in Jerusalem. Significantly, when the Ethiopian eunuch met Philip, he was reading not the laws of Deuteronomy but the Book of Isaiah. Isaiah had written that God would 'recover the remnant that is left of his people … from [among other places] Ethiopia' (11.11), and that 'eunuchs who keep my sabbaths' would be welcome in the house of God and receive 'a name better than sons and daughters' (56.4-5). Philip was able to show the eunuch that the good news of Jesus Christ was

even better than Isaiah had promised. Not only did God know and understand the eunuch's own experience of humiliation and ostracism, but Jesus had taken on that condition himself. And yet that suffering had turned to joy.

The eunuch asks: 'What is to prevent me from being baptised?' A bystander might have said: 'Well, there's a list of things. You belong to the wrong nation, you have the wrong ethnicity, you hold the wrong job, you come from the wrong background and you have the wrong sexuality' - all things that somehow still preoccupy the church today. But Philip felt the Holy Spirit give a different answer. 'There is nothing at all that prevents it.' And so the one who had been excluded found himself included and, we are told, 'went on his way rejoicing'.

Someone asked me recently: 'when will the Church of England stop regarding human diversity as a problem and begin welcoming it as a blessing?' When indeed? This week's report of the Anti-Racism Task Force, entitled *From Lament to Action*, sets out a series of recommendations. The Archbishops have welcomed them, acknowledging that the Church must be held to account for their implementation. On the issue of human sexuality, this year the House of Bishops has issued a 'teaching document' called *Living in Love and Faith.* Among other things it sets out the different ways in which the Bible can be understood in relation to LGBT+ identity, and the range of views it is possible to hold with integrity as a Christian. Every parish in the Church of England has been asked to study the document, so we will be holding a course on *Living in Love and Faith* online in the autumn, and I hope you will take part in it. Meanwhile the Archbishops have called on the Church of England as a whole to offer a message of 'radical Christian inclusion' to those who are LGBT+. This chaplaincy is one which offers such a message.

Last year, in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd, I suggested that the Church could do worse than heed these words of the American theologian William Stringfellow: 'Baptism [which is what unites Christians in all their diversity] doesn't abolish difference, but it transforms difference from a cause for fear into a manifestation of abundance'. That, surely, is the message of the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. As the writer of the first Letter of John points out: 'There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.'

Questions of exclusion and inclusion are not easy territory. We are also called to love those who see things differently from us. But Christ is insistent. Unless we meet that imperative of love, we will wither like dead branches of a vine. Fortunately, we do not have to do it alone. We do it in Christ, whose heart is bigger and more spacious than ours. And our Gospel reading today indicates how that works. If we are to receive the fullness of life that Christ offers, we must abide in him. It's about an attitude of the heart as well as the mind.

We need to be constantly alert to the dangers of unconscious bias, and there is much for the Church to repent of. We are part of an institution that has somehow failed to implement 23 reports on racism in 35 years. But let us never give up until we have done all that we can to proclaim God's inclusive love in a world in need of loving. We ask this in the name of the one who suffered, died and was buried, and is risen, ascended and glorified.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 6th Sunday of Easter

9th May 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Friends are one of life's most precious gifts. They listen to us, make us laugh, accept us, care for us, challenge us, steady us, help us pick up the pieces of what is broken, and inspire us to be better versions of ourselves. William Penn wrote that a true friend: 'advises justly, assists readily, adventures boldly, takes all patiently, defends courageously, and continues a friend unchangeably'.

What is the place of friendship in the Christian life? Why does Jesus, in our Gospel reading today (which forms part of the 'farewell discourses' to his disciples during the meal they shared on the night before his death), say that he is calling them not 'servants' but 'friends'?

Enduring friendships are instructive. Our best friendships teach us how to love, and to love better. They teach us forgiveness, patience, kindness and justice. They are where we learn hospitality, generosity, mercy and compassion. We catch glimpses of the eternal in the everyday, the beyond in the midst, and we see how we can become channels of the love of God to others. Jesus is suggesting, on the night before he was betrayed, that friendship is a primary setting in which we love one another and grow in the skills needed to bring that

love to the world. He modelled the best of that love. And we are asked to go out and do the same – loving others as we have been loved. To bear much fruit.

One sentence in our reading often puzzles people: 'You are my friends if you do what I command you'. We don't normally associate friendship with being given commands. But a friend is someone who changes you by knowing them. If we stop to think about it, friends often influence the way we think and act. At its simplest, we say: 'I used to make the recipe that way until I met Eléonore, and now I make it this way.' 'I used to think left-handed people were useless at sport until I met Henri, and now I think differently.' What we are given here is a promise that we will be influenced by Jesus. Or we could look at it another way: if we don't do anything Jesus says, in what sense *are* we his friends?

There is a deeper layer to this, and it's about how we understand our relationship with God. Jesus, knowing that he is about to die, gives his followers the tools they need to equip them for living beyond tomorrow. He is effectively saying: 'There is one word that sums up what all this is about: friends. I am passing on everything to you that I have learned from the one I call *Abba,* Father.' And, as Christ's friends, the disciples are saying in return: 'we are allowing ourselves to be changed by knowing you'. We are happy for our lives to be reshaped because of our commitment to you.

Jesus might have added this about the word 'friends': 'In some languages the word translates to 'companions', which means the one you eat bread with, and that is what we are doing tonight. So, if you ever forget what I have just told you, the thing I want you to go on doing is to go on being each other's companions by breaking bread together, and then when you do that you will

remember that it is all about being friends of God, friends of one another, friends with creation and, possibly the hardest of all, learning to be your own friend.' Our response to the undeserved grace of all that will be found in the fruit that we bear.

It has been said that Christianity is not a noun but a verb. 'Love one another as I have loved you.' It is about love in action, a radical call to live differently. A love that, as Paul says in his letter to the church in Corinth, 'bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things'. The definition of God's love is God's actions. We tend to think of love in terms of feelings. But we experience the reality of God's love in its results. For it is a love which creates, redeems, bears fruit, restores what has been broken, completes what is unfinished, and gives itself to the point of death.

Jesus speaks to his disciples of joy: 'I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.' Faced with the suffering that lies ahead, it might be a strange word to find here. Yet there is something about Jesus's obedience to the Father's will that gives him a freedom which others around him lack. He is somehow freer than all the people who bring about his death, held as they are in the grip of struggles for power and domination. The same is true of the Pharisees who so often challenged him for breaking the purity codes of which they considered themselves the guardians. All of these were acting out of fearfulness. Jesus instead acts out of love. Greater love has no one than this. As the Book of Common Prayer puts it, 'O God who art the author of peace and lover of concord … whose service is perfect freedom'. If we love our neighbour as ourselves, we are freed to live openly, with generosity and with joy.

Our Epistle reading, from the first Letter of John, shows how this works out in practice: 'For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world.' Love in action. It's been pointed out that when all is said and done, you know what a Christian is. It isn't about being versed in theology. It isn't about holding a set of 'fundamental' beliefs dictated by others who will tell you that you need to believe them in order to go to heaven (even though there are plenty of people around who will suggest that's what being a Christian is). No – fundamentally, it's about love in action. It's about being the ones who turn up when someone is in trouble. It's being the ones who put themselves out to help others. It's being the ones who, quietly and undemonstratively, live out the Beatitudes and the acts of mercy described in Chapter 25 of St Matthew's Gospel: 'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me…' (25.35). And it's about being the same people who are surprised when they are told that was something exceptional: 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food?' (25.37) … 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these… you did it to me' (25.40). You know them when you meet them.

'For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.' Jesus said: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another.' (John 15.12) God isn't asking something impossible of us. However disorientating this last year has been, for our lives and our habits and even sometimes our faith, let us remind ourselves of that – who we are and what we are about, as followers of Christ. And may we be known, as he asks of us, by the fruit that we bear.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 6th Sunday of Easter

9th May 2021

Eglise Sacré-Coeur, Oppède

The Revd John Smith

Today I cannot avoid talking about a subject that I know more about in theory than I do in practice and that is the subject of love. I have to confess at the beginning that I have been very careless with love in my life; the love I have been given by my family, the love that I have been given by those who have prayed for me on their knees and I am ashamed to say, the love that I have been given by God. I have also been careless in how I have scattered what I always thought of as love to others including my family. With that confession out of the way let us turn to our gospel reading for today which is almost a repeat from last week's epistle from John where he talks about God's love and ours. But here it is Jesus Himself who is talking so we better pay attention.

So, let's talk about love! The first obstacle we run into is that love in the English language covers such a wide spectrum of meanings: fondness, adoration, devotion, warmth, affection, infatuation, adulation, ardour, passion, charity etc. It expresses an intense feeling or deep affection as in: babies fill parents with feelings of love. Love is also used to express a great interest and pleasure in something: Peter loves his golf. Michael loves his dog. Christopher loves his rugby and I am led to believe he also loves Sarah. However, unlike English, when we look at the ancient Greek in which the New Testament was written, we see four distinct words used to describe the over-arching concept we refer to as "love". These words are eros, storge, phileo, and agape. We'll explore these different types of love as used in the Bible, and as we do, hopefully we'll discover what Jesus meant when He said love God and love one another.

Of the four Greek words that describe love in the Bible we are probably most familiar with the word ***eros***. This means sensual, sexual or romantic love. The term originated from Eros the Greek mythological god of love, sexual desire, physical attraction and physical love. The Greek word Eros itself is not in the

Bible. The New Testament never directly addresses the topic of passionate, romantic love. When the topic of sexuality is discussed, it is in terms of providing proper boundaries or prohibiting harmful behaviour. God is very clear that eros love is reserved for marriage; expressions of love carried out between a husband and wife. Promiscuity was rampant in ancient Greek culture and was one of the obstacles the apostle Paul had to battle when new churches were being started. Paul warned new believers against succumbing to immorality: "I say to those who aren't married and to widows—it's better to stay unmarried, just as I am. But if they can't control themselves, they should go ahead and marry. It's better to marry than to burn with lust." But within the boundary of marriage, eros love is to be celebrated and enjoyed as a beautiful blessing from God.

Neither is the word eros found in the Old Testament of course for those books were written in Hebrew. However, there is a very potent example of eros in the Song of Solomon which, to use an old term, we would even today describe as raunchy. I do not know how the book was included in the Bible. But it is important to note that the Bible does not shy away from the reality of romantic love and the sensations of physical passion; indeed, Scripture elevates physical love when experienced within proper boundaries.

The second word ***storge*** is a term for love in the Bible that you may not have heard before. This Greek word describes family love, the affectionate bond that develops naturally between parents and children, and sometimes between brothers and sisters. This kind of love is steady and sure. It is love that comes without invitation and endures for a lifetime. It is powerful. I remember hearing a mother of a young man who had murdered two people saying whilst she hated what her son had done, she still loved him and always would.

Storge can also describe love between a husband and wife, but this kind of love is not passionate or erotic. Rather, it's a familiar love. It's the result of living together day after day and settling into each other's rhythms, rather than a "love at first sight" kind of love.

There is only one example of the word storge in the New Testament and even that usage is contested. Paul, writing to the Romans, said "Be devoted to one another in love [storge]" thus encouraging them to relate in a familial sort of way. But, whilst there are not many uses of storge in the Bible, there are many examples of this love in action: Noah taking his family into the Ark, Lot leaving Sodom taking his family with him, Rahab saving her family in Jericho and that beautiful picture of sibling love between Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

Our third word ***phileo*** originates from the Greek term phílos, a noun meaning "beloved friend"; someone dearly loved in a personal, intimate way; a trusted confidant held in a close bond of personal affection. The powerful emotional bond seen in deep friendships.

Phileo is the most general type of love in Scripture, encompassing love for fellow humans, care, respect, and compassion for people in need. The concept of brotherly love that unites believers is unique to Christianity. Jesus said phileo would be an identifier of his followers: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." Love in action.

Phileo describes an emotional connection that goes beyond acquaintances or casual friendships. When we experience phileo, we experience a deeper level of connection. Those relationships when you seem to know what the other is thinking. This connection is different to the love within a family, perhaps, nor does it carry the intensity of romantic passion or erotic love. Two examples: schoolboys, Women in Love example Oliver Reed and Alan Bates wrestling naked.

The word phileo is used several times throughout the New Testament. One example is when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. When Jesus arrives at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Lazarus has been dead two days. Standing outside the tomb Jesus wept and the Jews said, “See how He loved [phileo] him!” Jesus had a close and personal friendship with Lazarus. They shared a phileo bond—a love born of mutual connection and appreciation.

And fourthly we come to the big one – ***agape***. It is the highest of the four types of love in the Bible because it is divine love defining as it does God's immeasurable, incomparable love for humankind. Agape love is perfect, pure, sacrificial, self-less, self-giving, and unconditional. Jesus Christ demonstrated this divine love to his Father and to all humanity in the way he lived and died. This Greek word, agápē and variations of it are frequently found throughout the New Testament but rarely in non-Christian Greek literature.

Agape love is more than an emotion. It is a foundational sense that demonstrates itself through actions. Agape is God's ongoing and outgoing concern for lost and fallen people. God gives this love without condition, unreservedly to those who are undeserving. And this is the definition of grace – undeserved love. Agape love is unmotivated in the sense that it is not contingent

on any value or worth in the object of love. It is spontaneous and heedless, for it does not ask beforehand whether love will be effective or appropriate in any particular case.

Agape love is the love that Paul was talking about in his famous "love chapter" (1 Corinthians 13). Agape love is patient and kind, love is not boastful, arrogant, rude or envious. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. And these three things remain: faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love. This passage is a popular reading at weddings and when I hear it and look at the couple deep in romantic love, I wonder if they have any comprehension at all of what these words mean.

Agape love is not merely an attribute of God, it is His essence. God is fundamentally love. That is the beginning and end of love, yet because love is God, it does not have any beginning or end.

An illustration of the difference between phileo love and agape love

You will remember that during the Last Supper Peter was adamant that he would never deny nor abandon Jesus, no matter what may come and within 24 hours Peter had denied even knowing Jesus three times to avoid being arrested himself. After Christ's resurrection, Peter was forced to confront his failure when he met Jesus on the lakeshore. This is their exchange:

Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love [agape] Me more than these?"
"Yes, Lord," Peter replied, "You know that I love [phileo] You." "Feed My lambs," Jesus said. A second time Jesus asked Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love [agape] Me?" "Yes, Lord," Peter answers, "You know that I love [phileo] You." "Shepherd My sheep," Jesus says. Peter was grieved when Jesus asked him a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" But as is the way with our Lord he was wonderfully gentle with Peter, in this third asking using phileo rather than agape "Do you love [phileo] Me?" Jesus asked, "Lord, You know everything! You know that I love [phileo] You." "Feed My sheep," Jesus said.

Peter affirmed his close friendship with Jesus—his strong emotional connection—but he wasn't able to grant himself the ability to demonstrate

divine love. He was aware of his own shortcomings. And Jesus affirmed His friendship with Peter—His phileo love and companionship. The key point is that Peter had not yet received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Until then he was incapable of agape love. But after Pentecost, Peter was so full of God's love that he spoke from his heart and 3,000 people were converted.

But let us return to our gospel reading to understand how this is to work:

- The Father's love for Jesus was the model for Jesus' love of the disciples;
- The obedient love Jesus had for the Father was to be the model for the disciples' love for him (that includes you and me)
- The self-sacrificing love Jesus had for them (that includes you and me) was to be the model of their love for each other. "Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."

The good news in this is that the initiative was all taken by Jesus. He chose them (and that includes you and me) and not they him. His design was that they should bear fruit, and his command was that they should love each other

Love is one of the most powerful emotions humans can experience. For Christian believers, love is the truest test of genuine faith. Through the Bible, we discover how to experience love in its many forms and to share it with others as God intended. When Jesus talks about loving our enemies, He is talking about agape love – divine love. So, if you are not quite there don't worry; keep trying, for it is divine love we are seeking to emulate.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Trinity Sunday

30th May 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

May I speak in the name of God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

That's a slightly different introduction to the sermon from usual, though it's one that many preachers use. The reason for choosing it today is that this is Trinity Sunday, the day on which the Church reflects on the nature of God, when we give thanks for the different ways we encounter God in our lives.

Last week I was invited round by a friend who has been a lifelong Christian. She admitted that she found the concept of the Trinity difficult to understand and it seemed to be causing her some anxiety. People often have a sense that the Trinity is complicated, and that even in asking such a question they are letting themselves in for a lesson about the complex discussions of the early church as it worked out the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I tried to reassure

my friend of three things: first, that the Trinity is not something we should expect to understand fully this side of heaven; secondly, that it is best approached instinctively rather than rationally, through the imagination; and thirdly, that it is sometimes easier to approach through art than language.

It is true that we experience God in different ways. First, as transcendent and mystical, the ground of all that is. We may encounter this aspect of God in a breath-taking sunset, or a tiny but perfectly formed flower, or a heart-stopping piece of music. A mystery sometimes referred to as 'the beyond in the midst'. The poet Wordsworth wrote this[1]:

> '… And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air…:
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.'

The experience of God as Creator.

Secondly, we experience God in relationship – most obviously, perhaps, when we fall in love, but also in the everyday familiarity of family and friends. Supremely we encounter this aspect of God in the person of Jesus Christ, the 'incarnate God' – reconciling, forgiving, freeing, whose wisdom and teaching have inspired unnumbered women and men through the centuries to live life to the full. God as Redeemer.

[1] William Wordsworth, *Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey* (1798).

Thirdly, we encounter God as Spirit, the subject of Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus in our Gospel reading today. I referred to this last week in terms of the wind in our sails – a divine presence that can brush our cheek with gentleness or sweep us off our feet with its energy. God as Sustainer, Encourager.

This threefold encounter – our experience of God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer – is what gives us insight into the uniqueness of God. A God who is unity in diversity. A God who is ultimately about relationship, the reciprocity of love. The theologian Jurgen Moltmann called it: 'the great love story of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, a divine love story in which we are all involved together with heaven and earth'.

As I suggested earlier, sometimes it is easier to approach the Trinity through art than through language. The picture you have at the top of your service sheets – Anton Rublev's icon of the Trinity, painted in the fifteenth century - shows three gentle, elusive presences inviting us into their communion. The Trinity expresses the dynamic, relational nature of the love that infuses the divine life – outward facing, spontaneous, overflowing to the creation and seeking its participation in return; a love that is self-surrendering (on the Cross) yet overwhelming in its power (as revealed in the Resurrection). The Trinity also helps us to find our true place in the world. For there is a space in front of the table for us. If we look closely, we notice that the table at which the figures are seated is shaped like a chalice, reminding us that it is through the Eucharist that we experience and respond to this invitation liturgically.

That may all sound rather complicated. But at its heart it is actually quite simple. God is a ceaseless movement of perfect love. The lover, the beloved and the love that passes between them. A love which overflows into the creation, into us, to which we are invited to respond in love.

At this point I can hear some of my friends say: here we go again, 'it's all about love.' But, ultimately, I believe it is. Let me tell you three stories.

First, some years ago I knew someone who died while he was still young. He worked hard, and his hard work was rewarded by more work, more responsibility, more challenges. In the end he became so busy that he did not even have time to go to the doctor, until the pain he had been feeling became overwhelming and it was discovered he had cancer, which by then was incurable. He told me before he died that, at the end of it all, no one ever wished they had spent more time at work. What mattered was the quality of the relationships they had had, the love they had given and received.

The second story is from the church where I used to worship before I was ordained. It used to organise a parish weekend in the summer. One year an erudite speaker came along to give a lecture. I can't now remember what the lecture was about. What I do remember is how, when the speaker got near the end of the talk, a 91-year old woman in the congregation stood up, walked to the front and interrupted the speaker with a passion that belied her years: 'This is all very well, but you haven't mentioned *love*. The Gospel is about *love*.' I can see her now, and it always makes me smile. For she was right. He hadn't, and it is.

The last story is an apocryphal one about St John the Evangelist, the author of the Fourth Gospel and the letters of John we have been reading over the Sundays since Easter, with their insights into the nature of God. One day, one of his followers came and said: 'Why is it that you always write about love? Why don't you ever write about anything else?' St John paused, waiting for his disciple to work out the answer. Finally, he answered the question. 'Because', he said, 'in the end, there isn't anything else. There is only love.'

Love, relationship, is what lies at the heart of God. And we are sent out to proclaim it, however inadequate we may feel to the task, as we heard in our reading from the prophet Isaiah this morning ('I am a person of unclean lips'). 'Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" We might look around and hope that someone else will answer that question. We might look around for quite a while. But in the end the question is still hanging in the air, and we realise that it will hang there until each one of us finds the courage to answer: 'Here am I; send me.'

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 1st Sunday after Trinity

6th June 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

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 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[1], 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.

[1] 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.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 4th Sunday after Trinity

27th June 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

It's been called the miracle within the miracle. Even on its own, the story of the raising of Jairus's daughter would be one of the most beautiful in the New Testament. The desperate case of a child in need of a miracle. The miracle being offered freely by Jesus, in the face of the scepticism surrounding him, even when he seems to have arrived too late.

This story is part of Mark's proclamation that the power of God will be finally confirmed by the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Kingdom. In his miracles, Jesus makes that power felt, makes the future present. He embodies the fulfilment of our reading from the Book of Wisdom: God 'does not delight in the death of the living'; God 'created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity'. Mark's message in this story, anticipating the end of his Gospel, is that even the worst that can befall us is not beyond the reach of God's power to bring healing. The people in the story are given a foretaste of resurrection. A source of faith and hope and love for a community.

So why is this story, beautiful in itself, interrupted with the story of an unnamed woman, at the other end of the social scale, to whom history refers only by

reference to her embarrassing disease? We are being invited to interpret the two miracles in the light of each other. And when we do, we find there are both parallels and contrasts.

Both are stories about human pain. The pain of the parents, the pain of the little girl, the pain of the woman who interrupts Jesus on his way to her. These are people going through some of the very worst things that ever happen to us as humans, encountering Jesus in word and action and emerging from the encounter transformed. Mark makes a more explicit link between the two stories. Jesus is on his way to save the life of a girl twelve years old and is delayed by a woman who has been ill for twelve years, the whole of the girl's life. There's a deliberate pairing. As Jesus prepares to restore life, we are confronted with the truth that for some people life is miserable day after day, compounded by the ways their fellow humans ignore or exclude them.

For the unnamed woman is not only ill. The Book of Leviticus taught that her condition made her ritually unclean, along with everything she touched and everyone who touched what she had touched. For twelve long years she would have been as good as excluded from her faith community. And because such ritual impurity was treated as contagious, people who were ritually unclean were socially excluded too. Nine of the twelve people whom Jesus heals in Mark's Gospel had conditions that put them in this category. I wonder if you have ever felt excluded because of something that is not your fault and over which you have no control. Jesus's healings are not only personal but social. In restoring people to community, he restores the community as well.

Mark emphasises four times that the woman *touched* Jesus. In that sense, this really is a story for our time. Her touch makes him ritually unclean. Jesus then

touches Jairus's daughter, adding further uncleanness. The Book of Numbers stipulates that anyone who touches a dead body is to be considered ritually unclean for seven days, 'cut off from Israel'. (We may think we have invented *consignes sanitaires* in the last fifteen months. Try reading the Books of Leviticus and Numbers.)

Time and again, however, Mark shows Jesus ignoring the ritual purity laws and touching those he came to heal. Even though he is shown elsewhere as being capable of healing from a distance, he chooses to touch the person wherever possible. In doing so, he acknowledges their humanity and faces down their isolation.

So here we have two stories of a girl and a woman, both healed by Jesus's touch. There are contrasts, too, between them. Jairus is named, a local respected figure. The woman is named only by her disease. He is a religious insider. She is considered a danger to ritual purity. He has financial resources (having more rooms than most in his house). She has no money left. He approaches Jesus from the front, advocating for his daughter. She approaches him from behind, silent in her shame.

Yet the woman has two things that none of the hardships she has faced can take away from her: her courage and her faith. She is brave enough to carry out her deed, and trusts that if she succeeds it will work. And she is right. We then hear Mark's favourite word, twice. 'Immediately' her haemorrhage stops. And 'immediately' Jesus is aware that power has gone forth from him. The scene freezes as he asks: 'Who touched my clothes?'

Realising she has been exposed, but knowing also that she has been healed, the woman 'falls down' before Jesus and tells her story. Another act of courage, which has ensured that her story has been told for two thousand years. Jesus

tells her that her faith has made her well. More than that – astonishingly, to those listening to him - he calls this untouchable woman 'daughter'.

Jairus too had fallen at Jesus's feet. He is a man used to being in control, but his daughter's illness has taught him the reality that he is not, that none of us are. Even now the news arrives that it is too late to save her. Jesus turns from commending the woman for her faith and challenges Jairus to have faith too: 'Do not fear, only believe'. The woman's twelve years of brokenness have taught her to trust in something other than herself. Jairus has not had that long to learn it, but the message to him is the same: 'Do not fear, only believe'. Mark then shows his hearers that the power of God is not limited in supply. The synagogue leader does not lose because the unnamed woman has won. Both these 'daughters' are healed.

The order of the healings is significant. Although the woman has no status, she is the one Jesus heals first. God's preferential care for the poor is affirmed. How might we bear witness to that in our lives? The fact of the interruption in the story is significant too. We are constantly interrupted with the inconvenient needs of others. Strangers who stop us in the street and ask for help, friends who ring us to talk about their problems when all we want to do is tell them of our own. We have to do with a God who is constantly nudging us to say – no, the need is over here, and now. If we are to be Christ's hands, feet and eyes in the world, as Teresa of Avila urged us to be, we must be ready to be interrupted, to be led by the Spirit we know not where. Part of the point of this Gospel story is that Jesus had time both for the daughter of Jairus and for the unnamed woman in the street, so does God, and so must we.

Ironically, it turns out to be purity that is contagious, not impurity – another reason why this is a story for our time. It's the compassion, the healing, the

faith, the hope and the love that pass from one human being to another. We have seen time and again over the last fifteen months that no prohibitions on touching can prevent that from happening. Our Gospel today, and every day, is a story of transformation. Jesus said: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' (John 10.10.) Even when it seems impossible. Even when it seems that everything has been lost. That's good news. That's Gospel.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 5th Sunday after Trinity

4th July 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd John Smith

Our readings today from the Old Testament and the Gospel can be used to form a triptych. For those of you who are unfamiliar with this word, a triptych is a set of three associated artistic, literary, or musical works intended to be appreciated together. Triptychs of three panels, typically hinged together vertically, were often used as an altarpiece. Hieronymus Bosch, Giotto and Rubens all created triptychs. The middle panel of a triptych is often the largest flanked by the two smaller related works. And this is the case with our readings this morning.

Before we start to examine the triptych, I should mention something that several of you, and especially our folk in the Luberon, have heard before. And that is when I do a talk in church it is addressed mostly to myself. Because of this I regard you as eavesdroppers who will pick and choose what appeals to you and reject what doesn't. I say that today because this message is different. It is definitely intended for me and every Christian preacher in the world but it is also a message that every Christian must also take to heart as all of us are called to live and spread the word of God.

Having mentioned only the OT and gospel readings you may be wondering where the third panel of the triptych is. I have done this by dividing our gospel reading into two parts. The theme that this gives us is 'obeying our call to spread the good news of Jesus' and as a subtext, to be aware that we will encounter those who reject the word of God. In our OT reading, God is sending Ezekiel to the people of Israel to tell them the word of God and call them to repent. And God says to Ezekiel there will be some who listen and probably the majority who won't because they are a rebellious people. As far as you are concerned Ezekiel it doesn't matter if they listen or not, it is your job to proclaim the word of God. It is important to note that God did not send Ezekiel on his own but He empowered him with the Holy Spirit. Just as we are empowered today.

The middle panel of the triptych, and rightly the largest of the three, is Jesus Himself giving us a living example of the reality of the experience of telling the good news. Here we have Jesus who, sometime into His ministry, has gone back home for a visit. Jesus is well enough thought of in his home town to be allowed to teach in the synagogue but the gathering who came to hear him got more than they were expecting. We are not told what Jesus said but from his other exchanges with the Jewish leadership recorded elsewhere in the gospels we can imagine that they would not be words of comfort. In fact, we read that they were shocked, astounded, and offended by what Jesus said but interestingly they did not challenge the veracity of what Jesus said but the source of what they were hearing and His authority to say these things. "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" This latter remark was probably a social slur as it was more usual to say the son of the father perhaps suggesting that Jesus was illegitimate.

The response of Jesus was to say that "prophets are not valued, respected, or honoured, in their hometown, not even by their own relatives and not even in his or her own house. We then learn that Jesus could do no deed of power there. I have heard the cause of this being attributed to the lack of faith of the people. Well, I have to tell you that lack of faith was not the reason because the omnipotent power of Jesus is not limited by whether we have faith or not. This is the One of whom John said: "*Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.*" Does this sound like someone who needs the faith of the crowd in order to do miracles? Jesus does not work like a rechargeable battery relying on the faith of people to charge Him up to perform miracles! The reason He could not do miracles there was because of the attitude of the people! They did not believe He had authority to do miracles. They did not believe Him so why would they bring anyone to Him for healing? Also note that Jesus had no difficulty healing the few sick people who did seek Him.

The last detail of this middle panel is the statement that Jesus was amazed at their unbelief. If you think about it Jesus was not amazed about much – how slow his disciples were to catch on, how blind the Jewish leadership was, how cruel the people were who persecuted Him; even that did not amaze the innocent one. But faith was the one thing that did amaze Jesus; either the lack of faith as here or the abundant faith of the centurion who had a sick slave.

So having heard about an OT prophet and seen the rejection of the word of God delivered by Jesus Himself, let us turn to the third panel where the spotlight falls on ourselves, the disciples of Christ. Here Jesus is sending them and us out to spread the word of God and proclaim that all should repent and turn to Him. The gospel of Jesus is that we are separated from God because of our sin but Jesus died to cover our sins so that we can have life to the full starting now and lasting through eternity.

"Repent" means to change one's mind. That means acknowledging that we have sinned, that we have turned our back on God, that we have worshiped other idols in place of God. It means to come humbly before God, understand that our sin makes us unworthy of His blessings, and genuinely hate the sin that separates us from Him. It means to turn away from that sin and put our total trust in His saving grace. This was the message God was giving His disciples then and us now to deliver to family members, friends, neighbours and strangers. It does not mean we will be perfect and never sin again but it does mean that we do our very best to honour Him in everything we do and walk as closely with Him as we can day by day.

If you are concerned about what you should say remember a statement that is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, “Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.” As far as we know, St Francis did not say these actual words. What he said was more nuanced “It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching” but I am sure you get the message. We have to walk the talk!

Proclaiming the good news to others is an essential part of doing God’s will. This brings us to the key feature for me of this third panel. And that is the essential element of **trust** for Jesus says to proclaim my word, to heal the sick, to cast out evil spirits, you don’t need anything else but a staff and sandals and I would add parenthetically the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, take no bread, no money, no bag for any possessions and not even a change of clothing. Here Jesus is not prohibiting us taking frivolous items but essential items as well. Jesus says, “trust me, I will provide everything else you need”. I don’t know about you but these days before I leave the house, I have to check that I have my keys, wallet, phones (2), spectacles (3) cheque book, passport, pen, and man bag and that is only to go to Auchan. I suspect that all of these things that I carry are not only are an added burden for me but actually get in the way of answering God’s call to proclaim his word.

And the real point here is that it is not the physical items that we should be bothered being equipped with to fulfil God's call to proclaim his word but the spiritual requirements of trust and faith. For sure there will be opportunity a plenty.

I would like to finish on an encouraging note for it is not until another seventeen verses into this chapter that after the apostles had returned to Jesus, they "gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught". That is such a beautiful picture but I wonder how each of us will feel, what we will have to show and what we will have to say when we gather around Jesus and tell Him all we have done and taught.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 6th Sunday after Trinity

11th July 2021

Eglise du Sacré-Coeur, Oppède

Jane Quarmby, Reader

What sells papers – and for that matter films, TV series and books? Royalty, sex and religion, preferably all three together! How many of us have followed the saga of Prince Harry and his wife falling out with their respective families so very publicly, dishing the so called dirt on worldwide TV with their interview with Oprah Winfrey? The Duchess of Cambridge only has to wear a dress from a high street shop for it to sell out immediately. Millions of us avidly watch these big occasions put on with all the pageantry which Britain seems to be so good at. Weddings, funerals – like Prince Phillip's simple and moving ceremony so recently– and coronations.

People haven't changed in the last 3000 years – the lives of the rich and powerful are fascinating to people who are neither rich nor powerful. I'm not sure why – is it the fairy tale aspect, the sight of so much beauty unattainable to most of us? But they are people at the end of the day and things go wrong for them as much as they do for the rest of us – divorces, deaths, family rows, and being so famous, their mistakes and problems are so much better known and gossiped about. No different now than to the time of Amos or John the Baptist.

Amos is an interesting figure from the Old Testament of around 753 BC. Unlike most of the other prophets he seems to have popped up into the limelight, issued stern warnings to the population about mending their immoral ways, and then disappeared again, back to his life as a farmer after just a year. He wasn't as it were a professional prophet, didn't get paid, just obeyed the will of God for a

short space of time to go and warn people they were on a rocky road to destruction. He was certainly well educated, and well aware of Israel's heritage and its contemporary political and economic circumstances. He has inspired many social reformers – Dr Martín Luther King for example, used Amos as a base for his own preaching calling for civil rights in the 1950's and 60's in America.

At the time, Israel was enjoying a time of peace and prosperity. But the trouble was that the rich were getting richer, and the poor were getting poorer. Those in power trampled all over those who weren't. Material things were prized more than anything else, and it was thought that if you were rich, it was a sign of God's favour. The elite were corrupt and immoral, appearances mattering more than substance, and people were more interested in partying than social justice. They forgot that all people are God's creation in his likeness. They used and abused those less powerful than them, especially women and children and the poor. They paid lip service to God's requirement that service to him is shown through service to others, that faith should be shown in practical caring for others and God's creation. God wants action, not just words. Amos was telling these people that all parties come to and end and theirs would very soon if they didn't sort themselves out – they would lose their power, their lovely houses, jewellery and fine clothes, and be led away into captivity by another nation (elsewhere he puts it graphically as "led away like fish, with a hook through their nose".)

And of course, as usual, no-one much took notice of Amos and there was indeed an invasion, the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and the people of Israel taken captive.

If we come forwards in time, 750 years, have things changed? No not really. The last of the prophets, John the Baptist, is still telling everyone they must change, go back to true worship of God, live their lives how God has commanded them to do – because they weren't. Israel is under enemy occupation, and the people, especially the rich and powerful, are once again setting a bad example. In particular the ruler of Galilee and Perea, Herod Antipas, had divorced his wife and married his sister-in-law – who had also divorced her husband, Herod's half-brother. This was offensive on many levels to the Jews. They viewed it as adultery and as breaking the law on not marrying the wife of a brother. John the Baptist spoke out against it and was put into prison. Herod was afraid the very popular

John would lead a revolt against him. Herod it appears is none the less fascinated by John – afraid of what he might do but also wanting to talk to him, recognising him for a good and holy man. But - Herod is, like his predecessors in Amos's time, also it appears one for parties, eating, drinking and goodness knows what else, including the famous dance by the young girl. Hollywood has taken to this story as it has all the salacious details one could wish for to sell a film – the drunken party, watching the daughter of Herod's wife performing a dance which pleased them all – often known as the dance of the 7 veils. I'm not sure where that came from as it's not in my bible but let's not spoil a good story.

In his highly overexcited state, and showing off to his rich friends and colleagues, Herod promises to give the girl whatever she asks for, and her mother, who hates John for speaking up against her and her lifestyle, tells her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. Herod is too weak, too afraid, to be seen to backtrack on his promise and so came the untimely death in a prison cell of the last of the prophets, a good and holy man, thanks to the spite of a rich woman.

So what do we make of these stories? What relevance do they have to us, 2000 years on? Has anything changed? In our world, are the rich getting richer whilst the poor are getting poorer? A recent report from Oxfam states "the 1000 richest people on the planet recouped their Covid 19 losses in just 9 months, but it could take more than a decade for the world's poorest to recover from the economic effects of the pandemic……. rising inequality means that it could take 14 times longer for the number of people living in poverty to return to pre-pandemic levels than it took for the fortunes of the top 1000, mostly white male, billionaires to bounce back…. the world's 10 richest men have seen their combined wealth increase by half a trillion dollars since the pandemic began – more than enough to pay for a Covid vaccine for everyone and to ensure no-one is pushed into poverty by the pandemic……the worst job crisis in 90 years with hundreds of millions of people now underemployed or out of work. Women are hardest hit - 112 million at high risk of losing their jobs. 22,000 black and Hispanic people would still be alive in the United States if they experienced the same mortality rates as their white counterparts. Infection and mortality rates are higher in poorer areas of countries such as France, India and Spain whilst England's poorest regions experience mortality rates double that of the richest areas. Our back yard!

People still traffic women and children, abuse others because they are a different colour, race, religion, sexuality or whatever, people still have no clean water or enough food to eat in so many places. Violence, poverty and neglect stalk the world. Too many have no work, no self-respect, no homes. It's a sad and sorry state of affairs.

But one thing has changed. At the time John the Baptist died, there was another young man around who would change the world – Jesus Christ. Let's not forget that we are the body of Christ – it's our hands, minds, bodies, that do his work here and now – so let's do our bit to improve the lot of those less fortunate than ourselves. Let's donate to charity, let's put pressure on our politicians to make change – inequality isn't inevitable, it's a policy choice by governments whom we elect. We don't need another Amos or John the Baptist to tell us what's wrong, with the media nowadays we can see it for ourselves. If we all do just a little, together we can change the world. Let's all do God's work.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 8th Sunday after Trinity

St James the Apostle - 25th July 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

It's not often that the feast of St James falls on a Sunday. When it does, in the great cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain, built above the place where it is said the Apostle was buried, they declare an *ano santo*, a holy year. In those years the great west door of the cathedral, known as the 'door of forgiveness', is opened as pilgrims enter through it in celebration, often having walked hundreds of kilometres to reach their goal. At the top of your service sheets, you have a picture of the statue of St James which stands above the 'door of forgiveness'. On his face is a look of welcome, reconciliation and joy.

It's interesting how people have rediscovered pilgrimage in modern times. Following the Camino, the Way of St James, was a popular medieval pursuit, but somehow it has also captivated the postmodern, sceptical mind. All sorts of people walk it for all sorts of reasons. I was with an ecumenical colleague in Marseille this week who was setting off to walk a section of the Camino, as he does every summer. He told me of a pilgrim he had encountered last year. When my friend asked him why he was walking the way, the pilgrim replied: 'I don't know. I'm hoping that by the end I will know.' Anyone who has spent time pondering the meaning of life might say the same.

Thanks to the insights into human longing of the custodians of Santiago de Compostela, pilgrimage is one of the things for which we remember St James the Apostle. Why else do we keep his feast? The Gospel passage that is read each year on this day hardly shows St James in a flattering light. Jesus nicknamed him and his brother John the Sons of Thunder - perhaps because they were hot tempered, argumentative, noisy - who knows? Whatever the reason, it's an image that has stuck to them across two millennia.

If James and John were among the most fiery of the Twelve, perhaps it's not surprising that they come to ask Jesus if they may have positions of prominence in the new Messianic kingdom. In Mark's Gospel it is the brothers themselves who make this request. Matthew, possibly to save them embarrassment, distances the request from them by ascribing it to their mother. But Jesus treats the request kindly, using it as a further opportunity to try to get his followers to understand the nature of the Kingdom that he is proclaiming. It is one where everything is the opposite of what people expect. Being important, being recognised, being treated like rulers, is not what it is about. 'Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.' Moreover, Jesus insists that it will involve suffering and death. He will give up his own life as a ransom - and, the implication is, his followers may have to do the same. Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles shows that this was indeed what happened later to James. Whatever his failings when the point of crisis came – when, like all the other disciples, he fled the scene of crucifixion - we see that by the end of the story James had heeded the words of his Lord. He did embrace the life of service that the Gospel demands, and he was prepared to give his life for it if need be. That's why the church keeps this feast.

Perhaps there's another reason too. The thing that I have increasingly come to realise about St James is what he stands for in terms of friendship. I wonder who your real friends are – the ones who would be on your list if you were told that you could only invite a few people to witness something important that you were doing, or something important that was happening to you. The ones you would want with you if you knew you only had twenty-four hours to live. Who would they be?

In Jesus's case, it was Peter, James and John. They were the three present at the raising of Jairus's daughter. They were the three present at the Transfiguration. And they were the three Jesus wanted with him in the Garden of Gethsemane, in his agony, the night before his crucifixion. They must have mattered to him so much, which is why their abandonment of him must have hurt so much too. And yet, in the days following the resurrection, they are forgiven for their failure. The three friends are among those listed at the breakfast on the beach, the scene on the shore of the Sea of Galilee when Jesus rehabilitates Peter after his threefold denial. We can learn from this, too, in how we treat our friends. James and John are among those empowered by that encounter with Jesus after the resurrection to go out and tell the world this extraordinary story. And their willingness to do so is why we are here this morning. Perhaps above all, therefore, we remember St James for the quality of his friendship. One that speaks of welcome, reconciliation and joy.

Wouldn't that be a good thing to be remembered for – the quality of our friendship? I wonder how we would measure up. Perhaps it is our Gethsemane moments that define our friendships. Whether we have been there for each

other when times were unbearable. Whether we have moved mountains to bring comfort at a time of loss, hope at a time of despair, love through a time of loneliness, peace in the middle of a storm. The best friendships are like that. We glimpse in them something of the divine life in which we are invited to share. Christ intimated this to his followers when he told them he was calling them 'not servants, but friends'.

One thing the pandemic has taught us is the importance of staying connected to our friends, however separated we may be from them physically. Keeping in touch, sending an email, making a phone call. Our friendships may go through times of distance or difficulty. Sometimes those we have counted on may even have hurt us. But when that happens, we should keep open the 'door of forgiveness', as Christ did to his friends on the lakeshore. Those whose spiritual inheritors we are as the body of Christ: 'I have called you friends.'

Luke does not tell us, in Acts, why Herod Agrippa had James killed. But the fourth-century historian Eusebius tells a story that James was accused of being a Christian, but witnessed so courageously that his accuser declared himself also to be a Christian, and shared James's death. As they were being led to their execution, the accuser asked forgiveness of James, who granted it with a kiss of peace.

It would be a shame if we only remembered St James by the question he asked of Jesus in our Gospel reading. Let us remember him, as Jesus did, for the quality of his friendship. And hope that, one day, maybe someone might remember us for ours.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 9th Sunday after Trinity

(and Reflection for service on Zoom)

1st August 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

I wonder what you pray for when you say the words 'Give us this day our daily bread.' It may surprise you (or it may not) that the church has never quite agreed on what they mean.

The word used for 'daily' in the original Greek language of the New Testament was a rare word that meant 'special', or maybe 'spiritual'. When the text came to be translated into Latin by St Jerome, he used two different translations of the Greek word in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer spoken by Jesus refers to 'special' or 'spiritual' bread, and Luke's version to 'daily [ordinary, everyday] bread'. It was the second version that prevailed when the prayer came to be used in the Roman Church, and we have gone on using the word 'daily' ever since.

This movement from a 'spiritual' to a 'bodily' focus in this sentence of the Lord's Prayer can also be seen at the time of the Reformation in the writings of Luther and Calvin. Partly in the wake of a series of crop failures in Europe at the time, a greater urgency to the physical aspect of the prayer developed. Martin Luther

famously drew up a list to explain the range of meaning which he understood the expression 'daily bread' to include: 'food, drink, clothes, shoes, houses, farms, fields, lands, money, property, a good marriage, good children, honest and faithful public servants, a just government, favourable weather, health, honours, good friends, loyal neighbours'. The twentieth century theologian Karl Barth commented that Luther's list belonged to the farming bourgeoisie of 16th century Germany and had moved a long way from the simple reference to 'bread' in Christ's teaching. Yet Barth agreed that it was right to interpret 'daily bread' in terms of what each generation needs for its survival and wellbeing. In an extended meditation on the Lord's Prayer published last year[1], Stephen Cherry suggested we might think of the prayer as simply saying: 'Give us enough for now', Give us what we need 'for today'.

That emphasis on 'today' reminds us – as it would have reminded Jesus's hearers - of the story of the manna in the wilderness, one of the defining passages in the Old Testament, which we heard this morning. The people of God, recently liberated from slavery in Egypt, are travelling in the wilderness. They are hungry and start complaining they would have been better off staying in Egypt where at least they had food. They then find that in the evening they are feasting on quails and in the morning on bread in the form of manna from heaven. The amount of manna they received was exactly enough for each day – neither too much nor too little. If they tried to hoard it, it went mouldy. They had to trust that the next day they would be given more.

The story of the manna offers a profound message for us about abundance and scarcity. Think for a moment how much of our anxiety is about scarcity.

[1] Stephen Cherry, *Thy Will be Done*, Bloomsbury (2020).

Throughout the pandemic we have been made to feel anxious about it – scarcity of masks, personal protective equipment for healthcare staff, hospital beds, medicines, vaccine doses, food in shops. We spend much of our time trying to convince ourselves we are self-sufficient by fending off scarcity. But the wisdom of these holy texts reminds us that we should, instead, trust in the abundance of a loving Creator, not give in to feelings of panic. Jesus taught his disciples to consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, and stop being eaten up by worry.

This is also the context of our Gospel reading today. The passage from St John comes the day after the account of the feeding of the five thousand. The crowd follow Jesus round the Lake of Galilee, presumably hoping to be fed again. We don't know much about the people who followed Jesus, but for many of them the source of the next meal would likely have been a matter of anxiety. There is an obvious parallel in this episode with the ancient Israelites journeying through the wilderness in need of food.

Jesus challenges his hearers to look beyond their immediate needs, and to develop an attitude of mind and heart that will actually help them deal with whatever life brings. 'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food which endures for eternal life.' His hearers, realising that he is talking about religion, and picking up on the word 'work', ask him what they must do 'to perform the works of God'. The reply is simple: 'Believe in him whom [God] has sent.' But the crowd respond with a challenge: Give us a sign so that we may believe. Perhaps still hoping for another meal, they refer to the sign of their ancestors being given manna in the wilderness. And it is at this point that Jesus's true significance is disclosed. He says to them: 'It was not Moses who gave you

the bread from heaven, but my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven'. Notice how the past tense becomes present. The crowd were looking to the past to offer them a sense of security for the future. But Jesus encourages them to think beyond the past: to remember not just what God had done but what God has promised to do. And then he says the words: 'I am the bread of life.'

This is the first of the seven sayings in the Fourth Gospel that begin with the words 'I am'. 'I AM' in the Old Testament was the name given to God himself. The Gospel writer is saying: this is it, there is nowhere further to look, it is the end of all our desiring. All our hopes and fears are met in this. The mysterious presence of God, which is all we need. The Father sending the Son so that humanity may experience the fullness of God. Christ is the bread of life, the true manna, the ultimate provision for us in life and in death. God in Christ is the comfort we need to walk in faithfulness through our earthly lives, and also the gift that promises eternal life with God. The Holy Spirit provides the power for us to glimpse and grasp these things in faith, and share them with others.

In our Gospel, Jesus teaches his hearers that the feeding of the five thousand was temporary, but what he is offering is permanent. A spiritual awareness that can help us feel completely different about how we live. A life where fear of scarcity turns into a sense of abundance. One that enables us to create a sense of abundance for one another too. Because no prayer for bread for ourselves can be complete without a hunger for justice for others. That they may have relief from famine and food inequality, a transformation of scarcity by whatever means we have at our disposal.

Karl Barth was at ease with the fact that 'bread' has a dual meaning in the Scriptures. For him, it is both sustenance for today and promise for tomorrow. The reality of physical food, aligned with the desire for justice, and at the same time the sign of 'God's eternal grace'. Whoever comes to Christ will never be hungry. Like the Samaritan woman at the well, whom Jesus assures that the water he will give will become in her 'a spring of water gushing up to eternal life'.

So for Barth, and for us, the prayer for 'daily bread' is not a question of either-or. We don't have to choose between asking for bodily or spiritual sustenance. It is both-and. He writes that what the prayer is saying is this:

> 'Give us this minimum which is necessary for the present moment; and, at the same time, give it to us as a sign, as a pledge anticipating our whole life. According to your promise, which we are receiving at this moment, we receive also the presence of your eternal goodness, the assurance that we shall live with you.'

That's quite a prayer. It's why we use it every day.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 10th Sunday after Trinity

8th August 2021

Eglise du Sacré-Cœur, Oppède

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

We have come in on the middle of a conversation. Our Gospel reading today is the middle one of three in a row taken from St John's Gospel, on the theme of Jesus as the Bread of Life. The whole passage comes just after the feeding of the five thousand, when the crowd who were following Jesus around the shores of Lake Galilee had experienced a satisfying of their physical hunger and were hungry for more.

Jesus challenges his hearers to look beyond their immediate needs, to develop an attitude of mind and heart that will help them deal with whatever life brings. 'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food which endures for eternal life.' But they challenge him back, and in today's passage begin to do so more stridently, particularly that group whom the Gospel writer refers to as 'the Jews'. (It must, always, be emphasised that this does not mean Jewish people generally, but a particular section of the religious leadership of Jesus's time who questioned his authority.) Still focussed on the question of food, his hearers compare their present experience with that of their ancestors receiving manna from heaven as they wandered in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses – 'What are *you* going to do?', they ask. 'Show us a sign and we will believe you.'

Jesus says to them: 'It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven'. The past tense becomes present as Jesus's true significance is revealed. Then he says the words: 'I am the bread of life.'

It is the first of seven sayings in the Fourth Gospel that begin with the words 'I am'. 'I AM' in the Old Testament was the name given to God himself. The Gospel writer is saying: this is it, there is nowhere further to look, it is the end of all our desiring. All our hopes and fears are met in this. The mysterious presence of God, which is all we need. The Father sending the Son so that humanity may experience the fullness of God. Christ the bread of life, the true manna, is the ultimate provision for us in life and in death. God in Christ is the comfort we need to walk in faithfulness through our earthly lives, and also the gift that promises eternal life with God. The Holy Spirit provides the power for us to glimpse and grasp these things in faith, and share them with others.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus teaches his hearers that the feeding of five thousand was temporary, but what he is offering is permanent. A spiritual awareness that can help us feel differently about how we live. A life where fear of scarcity turns into a sense of abundance.

'What are *you* going to do?' they ask. The enormity of the answer is pointed to and end of our Gospel reading: 'the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.' There are two references in those words, both of which are central to our faith.

One is a reference to the crucifixion, the self-giving, self-sacrificing love that lies at the heart of the mystery of what Christ did. The mystery of a God emptied of power, dying as a criminal on an instrument of torture. A place of shame, of utter desolation. Christ's words assure us we are dealing with a God who has known the worst that humanity can suffer and is with us in it, never leaving us alone. Transforming our humanity while restoring our relationship with the divine.

The other reference is to the gift Christ gave to humanity on the night he was betrayed - the institution of the Eucharist, when he took the simple elements of bread and wine, blessed them, broke them and poured them, and shared them with his friends. He told them they were his body and blood. And he asked them to do this in remembrance of him.

'Was ever another command so obeyed?', wrote the Benedictine monk Dom Gregory Dix. 'For century after century, … this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it … People have found no better thing than this to do for monarchs at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; … for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; … while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; … one could fill many pages with the reasons why people have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them.'

The fourfold action of taking, blessing, breaking and giving is, if we pause to think about it, a metaphor for what it means to love. In order to love we must first learn what it is to *be* loved – to be taken and to be blessed. We must also learn what it means to become vulnerable – to allow ourselves to be broken. It is only then that our lives can be truly shared with others.

Let us consider the word 'remember'. As well as calling to mind through memory, that most precious of human gifts which helps us make sense of who we are, it has another meaning – the opposite of 'dismember'. Michael Mayne, the late Dean of Westminster, published a book of reflections called *Pray, Love, Remember*, in which he wrote this:

> 'To be re-membered is our destiny. In the end that is our end, our purpose: that is why we are here. Like the penitent thief who says: "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom", our prayer is: "Lord, re-member me, refashion me, so that I may share the life of your Kingdom. Remake my life in the shape of your own." And his answer? "If you would truly remember me, if you would bring me out of the past into your present, then do this with bread and wine." And in our imagination we watch him as he takes bread … and … says (by implication): "This is me. This is the pattern of my life. You are now to re-member me, that is to say, to be my body in the world, your lives offered to God, your lives lived thankfully, your lives broken and shared in the costly service of others." … We are presenting, in these four acts of taking, thanking, breaking and sharing, the proper pattern and shape for all human life.'

‘It’s why we are here’ today. For as Dix writes, ‘best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom,’ people have done this.

I would like to add one more example to Dom Gregory Dix’s list. A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of being invited to visit Malcolm Dodd in his care home and take a service of Holy Communion to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his ordination as a priest. Malcolm was frail, his dementia progressing, but he was dressed in his alb and he sat beside me as I read the words he had first used fifty years earlier. When we got to the moment in the Eucharistic prayer when the priest repeats Christ’s words of institution – ‘This is my body, given for you’, I thought I heard a whisper beside me, but I wasn’t sure. I continued, saying the words which follow – ‘This is my blood…’ This time it was unmistakeable. Malcolm was saying the words with me. He was concelebrating. The one whose own memory was slipping away said, clearly and firmly, for everyone to hear: ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’ ‘Was ever another command so obeyed?’

Jesus said: ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me with never be thirsty.’

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 13th Sunday after Trinity

29th August 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

It has been heart-breaking this week watching news coverage of the airlift from Kabul of Afghan and foreign citizens, following the sudden takeover of power by Taliban forces, arriving in the city with all the confidence of a superior military force and an unshakeable belief in their particular brand of Islamic conservatism. I was struck by a TV interview with one member of the incoming forces, probably in his mid-thirties, smiling at the camera as he explained how life would from now on be different for women in Afghanistan. There was something chilling about the look in his unsmiling eyes.

There is always something chilling about religious fundamentalism - of whatever brand, in whatever place and of whatever faith. It is cold-hearted, brooks no discussion and is oblivious of the impact on other human beings of what it regards as the purity of its message. Yet people seek security in fundamentalism, for it offers them a clear identity. There is something seductive about offers of simplicity, whether by religious leaders or politicians.

In religion, a fundamentalist approach relieves people of individual responsibility from applying their minds, particularly to scriptural texts, encouraging them to take refuge in so-called certainties that obscure the inherent uncertainties we encounter when we engage properly with writings that are hundreds or thousands of years old.

Some churches put the following words – or something like them - on their websites: 'We preach a Bible-based Christianity'. Well, don't we all? But in order to understand the rich texture of the sixty-six different books that make up the Bible, you need to ask a lot of questions. To begin with, you need to ask the 'who, what, why, when, where' questions when looking at any particular biblical passage. Who was it written for? Who was it written by? What is the nature of the passage – history? law? teaching? poetry? story? parable? Why was it written - exaggeration to make a point? a letter written to settle a particular quarrel of the early church, remote from our 21st century context? When was it written? Where was it written?

The answers to such questions are often fascinating, but they are rarely simple. Over-simplification in matters of religion can cause damage to the very people to whom its leaders owe a duty of care. It tends to ride roughshod over groups of people, particularly minorities. It likes to control and is fearful of difference. This week, the fate of women and girls in Afghanistan in the months and years ahead, as well as minority groups such as those who identify as LGBTI+, is a source of deep concern to many in the west as we watch the events unfold. It is a reminder, if one were needed, that we must never take our own freedoms for granted.

Jesus was alert to the dangers of religious conservatism and had no patience with it. Our Gospel reading this morning tells of how a group of Pharisees and scribes have come from Jerusalem, expressing disapproval when they find religious rules being disregarded in the provinces. They ask Jesus to explain how he can allow his followers to ignore the traditions of their faith by not washing their hands before they eat. It is worth recalling that the Pharisees' particular focus was on enforcing the rules of their faith that concerned ritual purity. They had a sense that if only people had been better at complying with them, they would not have been invaded by the armies of the Roman Empire – much as, six hundred years earlier, their ancestors had come to understand that they had lost the promised land and been exiled in Babylon because they had drifted away from God.

Jesus, ever alert to the damage inflicted by the narrow legalism of his religious critics, replies by quoting Isaiah 29, in which the prophet warns the ancient Israelites that their worship had become a vain show and its doctrines based on human invention. Jesus then calls those around him to hear his answer to the Pharisees' complaint about his disciples breaking the food laws. He says that nothing that goes into a person's stomach will defile them, but only what comes from their heart. He reminds them, and through them us, that faith is properly located in our beliefs, desires, thoughts and intentions, and the actions that result from them.

Two thousand years after Jesus's conversation with the Pharisees, an obsessive focus on purity codes in religion, which still results in a narrow legalism, often emerges when religious leaders feel under pressure. We saw it on display in Kabul this week. We see it in Christian circles too, particularly when whole

categories of people start being excluded from the full life of the church. And when that happens, we need to be alert to it, just as Jesus was alert to it in his time.

Last week I took a wedding blessing in the Luberon, in which I preached about the power of love. As I walked away, a woman said to me: 'I wish more people would say that the Christian faith is about love.' It is sobering to discover how poorly the Church is perceived by those outside it. Within the Church of England, part of the problem in recent decades is that hardline conservatives have for too long dominated certain agendas.

We will have an opportunity to explore some of these issues in more depth in the autumn, when we will be running a course on the material published by the Church of England last year entitled *Living in Love and Faith.* The Archbishops of Canterbury and York have asked every parish and every chaplaincy in the Church of England to study this material and to send in feedback about it. It is about the Church's teaching on 'identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage', including the wide range of views that exist within that teaching. Unless you have been living on another planet, you will know that these issues have deeply divided the Church for around thirty years.

The *Living in Love and Faith* course offers a unique opportunity. The material does not seek to reach conclusions, and it acknowledges that there is likely to be a range of views on some of the subject matter within any church community. It also emphasises that such range of views must be honoured in the discussions. But it offers a unique opportunity, because I cannot think of any other matter of doctrine within living memory - possibly within the history of the church - on

which those who sit in the pews have actually been invited to give their views to the Archbishops. It is an opportunity that needs to be taken, particularly for a chaplaincy like All Saints, where we welcome people irrespective of the many differences that make up human identity, including gender and sexual identity. We see such an inclusive welcome as an outworking of the Gospel. But there is a vocal minority in the Church of England who have tried to prevent that voice from being heard. I hope you will find time to engage with the course. We will send out more information about it nearer the time.

These issues are also touched upon in the Letter of James, our Epistle reading this morning. He urges that what matters is what we do about this faith of ours - the kindness that we show, the loving service we perform. We must be 'doers of the word and not merely hearers'. As the woman at the wedding blessing said last week: 'I wish more people would say that the Christian faith is about love.'

How the perceptions which underlie that comment would have grieved Jesus, two thousand years on. When he was asked what mattered most about the faith tradition he had inherited, he replied without hesitation: 'Love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself.' He said nothing about excluding a neighbour because of any difference to do with their identity. On the contrary, the more they were excluded by the religious authorities, the more he welcomed them in.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 14th Sunday after Trinity

5th September 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

We pick up the story today in Mark's Gospel where we left it last week, immediately after Jesus was being criticised by a group of scribes and Pharisees who had come from Jerusalem. They had asked why his disciples were breaking the purity code by not washing their hands before eating. In querying this, the religious leaders were implicitly criticising Jesus's own leadership of his disciples and undermining his message of good news. Jesus, in reply, challenged their cold-hearted focus on ritual purity and exclusivism, pointing out how it was resulting in the failure to uphold the spirit of God's law.

This next scene takes Jesus to the region of Tyre, which was predominantly Gentile territory. There he encounters the Syrophoenician woman. The story is a notoriously difficult one to hear and to interpret. On the face of it, Jesus appears to reject a mother appealing to him in distress to heal her child. Not only that, he does so with apparently humiliating language, referring to her and her people as 'dogs'. Surely this is out of character?

Much ink has been expended in trying to explain the content of this story. Luke, writing for a Gentile readership, leaves it out of his Gospel narrative altogether. Matthew includes the story, though with differences from Mark's version (for example, the mother is referred to as a 'Canaanite woman'). In Mark's account, emphasis is sometimes placed on the fact that the word which Jesus uses for 'dogs' is the same word for 'puppies'. Is this, then, playful banter, with Jesus always intending to heal the woman's daughter, not needing to be persuaded but just reminding her gently that it was not supposed to be within his terms of reference? Perhaps.

Everything we know about Jesus from the Gospels suggests that he would be moved to respond to the Syrophoenician woman's request. But perhaps he is still smarting from the scribes and Pharisees' criticism that he is being unfaithful to the traditions of his elders. He is deeply aware of his calling as Messiah, the anointed one, sent to save and heal those whom God has chosen. In Matthew's version, Jesus at first ignores the woman's request, almost as if he is struggling within himself how to respond. Then, almost as if speaking his thoughts aloud, Jesus says to the woman: 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' That is when she comes right up to him, kneels in front of him and begs for help.

Once again, Jesus is confronted by a choice, the Pharisees' criticism still in his ears. Simply by talking to this woman, he will once more be considered 'unclean' by the religious leaders who criticise him, resulting in further confrontation and - ultimately - danger. Perhaps it is those critics' voices he is thinking about when he says to her: 'it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'. But the woman's wit gets the better of him. Suddenly the tension is released and, with it, Jesus's compassion for the human being in front of him, irrespective

of her status and the distinctions he was so often challenged for not respecting. We hear his surprise and delight, after the argument with the Pharisees about who was and who was not to be considered acceptable: 'For saying that, you may go - the demon has left your daughter.' Once more, Jesus may have made himself 'unclean' in the eyes of his critics, but his words and actions are of love and of healing, reflecting God's gracious acceptance of all people, whatever barriers humans put up to exclude individuals and categories.

It has often been suggested that this encounter is pivotal for Jesus's understanding of his vocation. In his evolving realisation of what messiahship means, more than once he encounters greater faith in those outside the bounds of religious orthodoxy than in those within. Yet, until now, however much he has criticised the guardians of religious orthodoxy for trying to exclude people from the scope of God's blessing, he has still seen his own calling as being to his own people. But the Syrophoenician woman, this outsider, will not let him limit it in this way. She challenges him to see the full implications of what he has been saying: this Gospel is for everyone.

It is worth recalling that what Jesus says to her about letting 'the children be fed first' is consistent with scriptural tradition: having been blessed by God, Israel was to become a blessing for 'all the nations'. The woman in front of him is saying: 'yes, and it's happening now'. By the time the Gospels came to be written, the Christian faith was already expanding across the Gentile world. Mark's Syrophoenician points ahead to that expansion.

Perhaps we should note, too, the placing of her story, which comes between the two feeding miracles – the feeding of the five thousand and of the four

thousand. Some have seen in those two miracles a metaphor for the blessing of Israel and the blessing of the nations. For numbers in the Bible are usually significant. In the first miracle, there were five loaves and five thousand people to feed. Five was the number of the Pentateuch – the five books of the Law, the Torah. When all had been fed, there were twelve baskets left over – the number of the twelve tribes of Israel. In the second miracle, there were seven loaves and four thousand people to feed. The number seven was the symbol of perfection, here encountering the number four – a number which some suggest is associated with the Gentiles, forty being the number of the known nations of the world. In between the two miraculous feedings stands the woman with no name, asking for healing – for salvation.

So we can detect different layers of meaning in this encounter between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman. What does it say to us, twenty centuries later? This story, like Jesus's response to the Pharisees in our Gospel last week, is another reminder that we too are called to love beyond all boundaries, ignoring human distinctions and prejudices – whether they be conscious or unconscious - because no one is beyond the scope of God's love.

As if to reinforce that message, Jesus's next encounter is with a man who is deaf and has an impediment in his speech. Once again, he is brought into contact with someone excluded from access to God's blessing by the religious leaders who saw themselves as the guardians of it. Those who were disabled were not allowed into the inner part of the Temple because, as people who were 'different', it was thought that they were displeasing to God. (Before anyone says 'but that does not happen now', we should ask ourselves how well the Church includes people who are disabled. Better still, we should ask them.)

Here, in front of Jesus, was a man literally excluded from being heard, owing to his disability. Jesus's response? '*Ephphatha*.' Be opened. There is nothing that excludes you from God's love and acceptance.

Christ's radical inclusion of all who were treated as outcasts in his time put him on a collision course with those who believed they were the guardians of religious orthodoxy. It took him all the way to Calvary. I wonder how far, in our time, we might find ourselves ready to go.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 17th Sunday after Trinity

26th September 2021

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

It's good for a Chaplain to go away sometimes. Not only have I enjoyed visiting England for the first time in nearly two years, catching up with family members and friends, but I have also been reminded what a wonderful set of colleagues I have here, who have looked after the chaplaincy so well and so generously during that time.

Such knowledge is part of what Moses discovers in our Old Testament reading today from the Book of Numbers. The ancient Israelites have been freed from slavery, led out of Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea, given water gushing from a rock and fed manna in the desert. Yet all they seem able to do is complain. (I hasten to add that any parallels with the chaplaincy end there!) They don't like the manna, instead getting nostalgic about cucumbers, melons and garlic, somehow forgetting the slavery that accompanied them. They don't look around them and give thanks to God for being alive at all. They are, in fact, still behaving mentally like slaves, not taking responsibility for themselves or their responses to what has happened - just complaining.

Moses feels overwhelmed. 'I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.' But he is given the key advice to appoint some colleagues. His responsibility begins to be shared among the people, equipping them for the freedom to which God has called them. Seventy are chosen to share the burden of responsibility that goes with freedom. Moses learns that no one is indispensable – instead, he learns to recognise the gifts in those around him and see the larger context in which they are all set.

In Christian terms, this is about de-centring. For Christ is always the centre, not us. Recognising we are not alone is what we call church. And the church, too, needs to be aware that its efforts are not the be all and end all. It sometimes feels as though a considerable amount of its time is spent trying to shore up diminishing resources – a sense of which has been accentuated during the pandemic. But the church is part of a larger story which we call the Kingdom. The Kingdom's boundaries stretch far beyond those of the church, and when we look outwards and see all its activity, it can be liberating. For the Gospel always moves outwards, and so must we.

These are good things to keep in mind as we approach the autumn. Within the chaplaincy we are beginning several new initiatives. Tonight we are holding our first evening service in Aix-en-Provence, in a building kindly made available to us by the Eglise Protestante Unie de France. In three weeks, all being well, we will be holding our first service in Manosque, hosted by the same church. There is new energy, new purpose, a commitment to welcoming new people in. There is much work to be done, but our readings today are a reminder that we must move forward trusting in God's abundance, rather than held back by our own sense of scarcity. In terms of moving outwards, we also hope to begin focusing more on our community engagement – standing where Jesus did, with the

dispossessed and marginalised. It's one of the things mentioned in the new vision and mission statement which we will be adopting in the autumn.

Our worship materials in Aix tonight will be based on those of the Iona Community, which describes itself as 'a Christian ecumenical community working for peace and social justice, rebuilding of community and the renewal of worship'. The Iona Community literally grew out of a church that was in ruins, when in 1938 George Macleod (a Church of Scotland minister working in a deprived area of Glasgow during the Depression) took a party of unemployed craftsmen and trainee clergy to the Island of Iona off the coast of Scotland, where they set about restoring the monastic quarters of the abbey. From those small beginnings, Macleod's vision led to a movement that has inspired people across the world.

The church in each generation needs to find new purpose. Our reading from the Letter of James picks up this theme – each one of us has been granted a share of God's healing power, through Christ and the Holy Spirit, and our task is to use it for the good of others. It is no longer someone else's responsibility, but ours.

Our Gospel reading explores in more depth this responsibility for caring, in a radically inclusive vision. It comes just after Jesus's second prediction to his disciples that he must suffer and die. The disciples had found someone who was not part of their immediate group healing people in his name, and had tried to stop them. Jesus rebukes them with the words: 'whoever is not against us is for us', emphasising that if they try to stop others believing because of their own narrow vision of what it means to belong to Christ, it would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone round their necks. They are urged instead to hold on to the radical demands of the Kingdom, resisting the temptation to turn in upon themselves, adopt a bunker mentality and become

factional and divisive. They are to 'have salt in themselves, and be at peace with one another'. Salt was essential not only for seasoning, but also for preservation and healing. If you rubbed it on a wound, it burned, but it also healed, bringing peace.

The reading continues with a collection of Jesus's sayings in which he holds up a mirror to other aspects of our human behaviour. He urges us to be honest with ourselves about the things that separate us from God, which can, if we are not careful, lead us to a place that can feel like a living hell. One theologian[1] has described hell as 'the terrible weariness and incredible boredom of a life focused entirely on itself'. What metaphorical stumbling blocks are there for us today that do this? What is the metaphorical 'hand', 'foot', 'eye' in our own lives that keeps us from the fullness of life promised by Christ?

Our hands are the things that do work – is our work, or the way we do it, compatible with Christ's vision for a life lived to the full? Our feet are the things that take us towards a destination – are our goals in keeping with those of the kingdom of God? And where are our eyes focused? Of the things that compete for our attention, how often do they look towards the example of Christ? Jesus reminds us that our acts and omissions have an impact on others. He ends with the striking reference to salt losing its saltiness, that quality which Christians are meant to have – to be salt to the world. What are the ways we fail to stand up for the values of the gospel, we who identify as followers of Christ?

If everything were left to us, things would start to feel a bit bleak. But the Gospel we celebrate is one of hope in spite of the worst of human behaviour. It tells of how God takes the raw material of our human lives and transfigures it. Just when hope seems impossible, God's power to transform is revealed. Our deep-

[1] Daniel Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding.*

rooted tendency to complain, never feeling that we have enough, always wishing for something better in the past or in the future, rarely being able to rest in the present moment and give thanks to God, is redeemed by God's grace.

We are reminded of that assurance in the Collect set for this week. Echoing words of St Augustine, it says this:

> Almighty God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you: pour your love into our hearts and draw us to yourself, and so bring us at last to your heavenly city where we shall see you face to face.

Our restlessness, our dissatisfaction, is ultimately something only God can satisfy. We must wait until the next life to experience it to the full. Meanwhile Jesus offers us a way of living well in this world, if only we will learn from him. For we *will* find our rest in God and, until we do, we know to whom we should go.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 18th Sunday after Trinity – Harvest Thanksgiving

3rd October 2021

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

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).

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

10th October 2021

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

Sermon

"Wealth matters!"

This is a title in the 2021 edition of the Global Wealth Report I came across recently. You will be pleased to hear that global household wealth was largely immune to the challenges the world faced last year, and that wealth per adult rose by 6% to reach a record high of nearly 80,000 USD. Maybe this was not what you experienced last year, and you wonder if your microscopic contribution made it into this report or why haven't you seen people around you benefit from this considerable increase.

This kind of statistic focuses on the upper echelons. Nevertheless, the report has the honesty to mention that one of the greatest divides today, the one between the poor and the rich, has not ceased to widen. We may not be among the 56 million 'high net worth individuals' worldwide (that is, those who are millionaires or more…), but most of us are on the rather comfortable side of the gap, and we cannot even imagine its breadth. There is more than our personal wealth that contributes to this divide: our decisions, our consumption have effects upon everyone on this planet. Look up a website that provides an ecological footprint calculator, which approximates how many Earths it would take to sustain all the

world's inhabitants in the same lifestyle that you lead. If everyone lived like me, we would need 3 Earths – it is eye-opening and sobering.

"Nowadays, the rage for possession has got to such a pitch that there is nothing in the realm of nature out of which profit cannot be squeezed." Dixit Erasmus of Rotterdam, at the beginning of the 16th century. There is nothing new under the sun.

We have just heard one of the most radical exhortations of Jesus: "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor." These are certainly words "sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4.12) Do you feel "laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account" (Hebrews 4.13)? I do. It's so difficult to let possessions go.

Is this a story about condemnation of wealth?

There are two narratives running through the Old Testament. On the one hand, in the book of the prophet Isaiah, there is judgement against Israel's wealthy people, who pile up houses one after the other. Prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel also challenged the wealthy. On the other hand, Abraham, Jacob, or Job's wealth are tangible proof of God's blessing and faithfulness. Wealth, of itself, is not seen as evil.

No wonder the disciples are perplexed. If those who appear most blessed have more difficulty to enter God's Kingdom than a camel going through the eye of a needle, then who can be saved?

Throughout the ages, the Churches had a variety of views and teachings on wealth, ranging from "wealth is an offence or, at least, an obstacle to Christian faith" to

"wealth is the outcome of faith". The last century saw the development of a prosperity theology or "the health and wealth gospel", claiming that financial blessing is God's will for Christians. Whatever their theology, rather often the Churches embraced wealth and the power that came with it – or, at least, they befriended the wealthy and encouraged their benevolence, without questioning how their wealth had been acquired. Wealth matters.

Is this a story about enrolling for voluntary poverty?

Let's be honest: poverty is a perpetual state of anxiety and stress, it makes one sick in body and in spirit. Poverty is pernicious.

Nevertheless, Gospel stories, like the one we read, have inspired some to follow Jesus' exhortation.

In the thirteenth century, Francis of Assisi, *Il Poverello*, abandoned his own wealth and his inheritance, to live among the destitute. Yet we must understand that, for Francis, being poor was not a question of being without possessions merely for the sake of being without possessions. Rather, it was a sign of his poverty of spirit, that is, his total reliance on God in every aspect of life. For Francis this was not a deprivation, yet a wonderful liberation. He could now walk unhindered towards the utter poverty of Jesus on the cross.

In the third century, after listening to our Gospel reading in church, St Anthony the Egyptian went home with urgency to sell his property and donate the funds to the poor. He then moved into a cave in the desert to seek the Lord. After hearing the same verses today, very sadly, I don't think I'm going to feel the same urgency to change my life. Half-hearted commitment to Christ? Lukewarm Christianity? What is it that I am called to give away? On what possessions is God calling me to loosen my grip? How could I unburden myself to follow Christ?

"Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor; […] then come, follow me." Follow me – yes, this story is an invitation to discipleship.

The man of means who approaches Jesus with urgency – he ran up! – is responding to prophet Amos's injunction: "Seek the Lord and live!" He is a good and decent man, and of great faith. Yet he knows that despite his righteous life of honouring the tradition, keeping the rules, respecting the Law, practising the rituals, he is unfulfilled. Do we have a similar craving in our righteous life? Besides our reading the Scriptures, praying, coming to church? Are we hungry for more meaning? Do we have a desire to be with God in all eternity? Or do we just seek a word of affirmation that everything we are doing is right and that nothing taxing will be asked of us?

Jesus' call is one to a life of discipleship, not to a life of poverty. Jesus invites the rich man to a life of meaning and purpose which so far has evaded him. This call "challenges and indeed cuts right across the instinctive attachment to that which we possess" (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*). Once again, all that it means to follow Jesus bruises our instincts towards self-preservation and security.

Jesus offers the rich man a call to discipleship, he invites him to give up all that makes up his identity and status in the world. The kingdom of God confronts us with a vision of life and identity quite incompatible with so many of our presuppositions about wealth, prerogatives, and selfhood – it leads inexorably to an identity crisis. Yet we are offered a new identity in Christ.

The rich man is not yet prepared to take the hard road of discipleship and to trust that God will accompany him on that road, guiding him through loss, shadow, suffering. Are we, individually or as a Church, fully prepared to walk that road? Or do we still look for worldly security?

Pope Francis, who has occasioned much criticism by choosing simplicity in liturgy, in his lifestyle and in his service, calls the Church to be “a poor church for the poor” and to leave behind wealth, the yearning for status and power, and all the strings that tie it to the world. And also to make the leap forward in love that Jesus asks of the rich man; without it, he says, our life and our Church become sick of “complacency and self-indulgence” (*Evangelii Gaudium*).

How could we make this leap forward without choosing a poverty in spirit, that is, our total reliance on God? Jesus Christ always points to the Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hidden, so that we accept and welcome our utter dependence on his mercy alone. He points to God as absolute claim and final succour. Christ gives us assurance that “for God all things are possible.” This shifts the question away from how eternal life can be inherited to how we can live having encountered grace. If we recover a sense of grace, then the way to humble service, common good and love for one another will be open. In all our striving and hesitating and failing, Jesus will keep on looking at us through the eyes of divine love, never giving up on us, because, truly, for God all things are possible.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Last Sunday after Trinity

24th October 2021

Bible Sunday

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

'You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life… Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.' (John 5.39-40)

A few weeks into my curacy I was sent along to a community meeting organised by the local council in the parish where I was working. The purpose of the meeting was to promote good relations between neighbours on a social housing estate. I was put at a table with a representative of the council and a group of residents. The residents were asked what they thought about living on the estate. The response was an angry outpouring of prejudice towards migrant families who had recently been housed there, complaining that they were unfriendly, had different customs and 'didn't even speak English'. Finally, one of the residents turned to me with a sickly smile and said: 'Doesn't it say in the good book, Vicar, "when in Rome, do as the Romans do"?'

I replied that, actually, the good book says that we are to love our neighbour as ourselves. I asked the lady if she had ever wondered what it might be like to find yourself in a strange city, far from family and friends, where you didn't speak the language. I wondered if her neighbours might actually be frightened of their surroundings, and of the people living there who were so hostile.

There was a silence, following which quite a sensible conversation developed about how cuts in local authority expenditure had led to the closure of services that had in the past enabled new neighbours to get to know one another - and how, by restoring those services, barriers with the new occupants might be broken down. But the comment about the Bible stuck in my memory as an unwelcome, if somewhat ridiculous, example of how if we are not careful scripture can be weaponised in the cause of intolerance and prejudice.

Today we celebrate and give thanks for the life and revelation of God in the scriptures, a library of 66 books written over a span of some fifteen hundred years, available to 98% of the world's population to read in a language that they know. We treasure the truth of God expressed there, the richness of form and language. We are called to engage with all our senses, to wrestle with the parts that challenge and confront us and to use all our intellect and imagination to understand it. There should always be a sense that understanding is a little beyond our reach, so that we work towards a deeper experience of God in its pages.

The living creative word of God, that is found as a deep stream running through the scriptures, is beautifully described by the prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament reading this morning. It quenches our thirst, satisfies our appetite, brings life and growth - calling us to thoughts and ways beyond ourselves. 'Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.' The creative word of God will shape us and challenge us as individuals and as a community. We need to be absorbed by it and so be led into new understanding. Each time we open our hearts and minds to the scriptures we are given the opportunity to connect to the living God, expressed most fully in God's living Word, Jesus Christ.

But what happens when we don't allow ourselves to see the scriptures as a living text, through which we can find God, but read it with the barrier of our prejudices and fears or use it for our own ends? Jesus's words in our Gospel today, addressed to some religious leaders who had used the scriptures as a weapon against him when they found him healing on the Sabbath, show how easy it is to manipulate the words of God, to stand outside judging rather than risk being open to the potential life within them. Jesus replies to his detractors: 'You search the scriptures because you think in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.'

As with the religious leaders who challenged Jesus, the authority of the Bible and specific texts have been used across the centuries to defend many kinds of intolerance and prejudice, including slavery, racism and the position of women. Scripture has been used as a means of creating barriers to define who is in and who is out; it has been treated as something life denying rather than a way to freedom and life and peace; the living word of God that includes rather than excludes, that brings life rather than denies it. As we enter into the life of God we are called to places and understanding beyond ourselves. God's thoughts and ways are greater than ours.

At present the Church of England is exploring how different ways of approaching and understanding scripture can lead to different conclusions about what it has to say about issues of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. The most intractable issue is how the church should respond to the huge social changes that have taken place over the last fifty years around attitudes to same-sex relationships and questions of gender. There's a growing acceptance that whatever teaching emerges from this process will somehow need to balance the needs of diversity and unity. Those involved will need to have those words of

Christ in their ears as they grapple with the reality that the church contains people with deeply held convictions that differ from their own, yet all are called to be one in Christ. It's hard work, but a necessary process if the church is to move forward in love and faith.

An encounter with Jesus, the living Word of God, changes us, as individuals and as communities – it moves us, shapes us and leads us on new paths to new understanding. In our Epistle today Paul urges Timothy, his younger colleague, to 'be persistent' in proclaiming the message of the Gospel, 'with the utmost patience'. As we are called today to reflect on scripture and use it to develop all our relationships - especially those with whom we disagree - and to deepen our own spiritual lives, let us try to find ways to enter into and be absorbed by God's word so that it ignites the life in us, drawing us together in love, so that God's purposes may be fulfilled in us.

As the prophet Isaiah wrote, 'So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.'

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Last Sunday after Trinity - Bible Sunday

24th October 2021

Sermon – Aix-en-Provence

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

On Bible Sunday, many churches join in celebrating God's word in the Scriptures, giving thanks for the Bible in our lives and in the life of our communities, and committing to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Scriptures. Year after year, I feel moved to renew this commitment and, at the same time, I ponder how to inspire people around me to have a deeper engagement with the Bible. It sometimes brings to my mind a conversation I had years ago, when I was asked what I thought about biblical authority.

The word 'authority' doesn't sit very well with my generation. And even less with the younger generation. For many people, the word carries negative connotations; worse, for some, because of their personal experiences, it chimes with a claim to the right to rule and command, with power to enforce obedience, with submission, even with injustice or discrimination.

In the 21st century, when we put our trust in science and technology, because of their claim to offer tangible certainties, answers to important questions, solutions for problems, promises of longer and happier life, who would still think of the Scriptures as having a directive and operative voice in our lives? How many are those, in Western Societies, who turn to the Bible as a source of hope and encouragement, so that they may live?

Thus, to make the aforementioned conversation possible, I shied away from ascribing authority to the Bible and tried to offer two other paradigms: the Bible as a territory, and the Bible as a conversation.

"The Bible is the territory in which Christians expect to hear God speaking", says Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury (*Being Christian*).

A territory so vast, that its exploration can never end. But it's also a territory that has depths to descend into, and heights to be scaled. The most obvious paths to be followed can prove to be a labyrinth. The dark, endless passages can suddenly open to embrace a breath-taking view.

And while wandering across this territory, one explores the landscape of one's own soul, with its abyss of fears, inconsistencies and contradictions, and its peaks of hopes and dreams and longing for eternity.

"In these books we may learn [to know God, but also] to know ourselves", we can read in a 16th century *Exhortation to the Preaching and the Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* attributed to Archbishop Thomas Cranmer.

So the Bible is also a territory in which to dwell confidently as a disciple, that is, as a learner.

What does this confidence mean? The belief that the biblical texts can yield an answer to any question and a solution to all life's situations, that they can be straightforwardly normative, may be rooted in an assumption that one owns the key to reading the Bible and to discerning God's mind.

Not only is the Bible one of the most pluralistic texts, but you will agree with me that God's mind is infinite. I would, therefore, plead for a confidence that means trusting God to be at work in the process of reading and interpreting. Such a confidence requires one to avoid exercising dominance over the text, to be open to the Word, and to allow it to enter and operate into one's life.

It requires one to see the Bible as a conversation.

"The Bible isn't a book to read and put down", explained the former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, because "it's God's invitation to join the conversation between heaven and earth, that never ceases."

It's a conversation about the inspiring ways of God with us, across time and history. It's a conversation in which I let God address me as 'you', and I feel moved to address God in response. I come with my own questions, and the Scriptures raise questions in me.

Nevertheless, this is not going to be a smooth conversation. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD." (Isaiah 55.8) As we read a couple of weeks ago, in the Letter to the Hebrews, God's Word can be very disruptive, piercing the readers or the listeners, laying them bare before their own eyes and "to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account" (*Hebrews 4.12*). There is purpose in the Word of God! Let's not shy away from engaging with its transformative power.

There is much to learn from Jews who "don't [just] read the Scriptures, but argue with them, wrestle with them, listen to them, and turn them inside out to find a new insight they have missed before" (Jonathan Sacks). It means reading the Scriptures with both heart and head.

Anglicanism is hospitable to a particularly rich approach to the Bible. Biblical language and imagery are interwoven throughout the liturgy, as well as in our hymns. The Anglican church has a long tradition of encouraging people to open the Bible not only for worship but also to interpret it. Reason and tradition can and should be invited to assist this interpretation.

The Bible is a territory to explore and in which to make's one's dwelling as a disciple and where one can engage in transformative conversation. So, the Bible has authority.

The Latin word *auctoritas*, which becomes *authority* in English, comes from the verb *augeo*, which means to bring into existence, to increase, to perform a creative, founding act. Thus, the authoritative person or entity is a founder of something unheard of, of something extraordinarily new.

Let's read again the last verses from Isaiah: "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, […] so shall my word […] not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55.10-11) God's authority vested in Scripture is designed to bring new and abundant life, to liberate human beings, to set them free to be fully human.

"The Word of God is living and acting" (Hebrews 4.12). The force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the church, the strength and faith for each of us, food for the soul, an everlasting source of

spiritual life. We are called to sit under this transformative power of the Scriptures, so that we learn how to live as the people of God for the world, conformed to the heart of God.

“Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.” (Isaiah 55.6)

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – All Saints' Day

31st October 2021

Jane Quarmby, Reader

Today we are celebrating two Christian Festivals – that of All Saints' Day tomorrow on the 1st of November, and that of All Souls' Day which is on Tuesday the 2nd.

Since the Middle Ages a yearly festival has been held to honour all the martyrs who have died for their faith in Christ, a celebration that in time extended to all those men and women in whose lives the Church as a whole has seen the grace of God powerfully at work – these are the ones we tend to think of when we refer to 'the saints'. Many churches and buildings are named after particular saints or, as in our church here, All Saints.

But also, a saint is anyone who is set apart for God's special purposes. In this sense, every follower of Jesus Christ is a saint. In most of his letters the apostle Paul refers to the recipients as saints, even when he wasn't too sure that they were leading very saintly lives. But it's comforting to know that we are all in our own way, saints, however well (or with difficulty) we follow Christ.

In the Anglican tradition, All Souls' Day (also known as the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed) celebrates the saints in a more local and intimate way. It allows us to remember with thanks those we have known more directly: those who gave us life, or who nurtured us in faith. Nowadays it is often celebrated in

churches on the same day as All Saints, as we are doing here. In France, where this season is kept as a public holiday, people travel all over the country to remember all those who have had an influence on them, celebrating their lives with flowers on their graves – especially chrysanthemums -, candles and meals as families.

In the Church of England's teaching about this season, it is said that 'redemption is a work of God's grace; it is God who redeems us in Christ, and there is nothing to be done beyond what Christ has done. But we still wait for the final consummation of God's new creation in Christ; those who are Christ's, whether or not they have passed through death, are joined in prayer that God's kingdom will be revealed finally and in all its fullness.'[1]

So, in this season, it's very appropriate that today's Gospel reading is the story of Lazarus and his raising from the dead. I can't help feeling rather sorry for Lazarus who having suffered an unspecified illness, died and was buried, was then brought back to life and became a marked man. He didn't seem to have any say in the matter and as the living proof of the power Jesus had from God was presumably much in demand as evidence of Jesus as the Messiah. But the flip side of this was also that the enemies of Jesus felt enormously threatened by the reappearance of Lazarus and wanted him straight back in the tomb before he had a chance to be seen by anyone. It is perhaps for this reason that the story of Lazarus is only in John's Gospel, which was written later than the others by which time Lazarus presumably had died again. Which is also really hard on Lazarus – having died once, he knows he is to go through the process again. We don't know what it's like to die, most of us probably fear the process of dying, but he knew what it would be

[1] Common Worship, *Times and Seasons*.

like all over again. I can't help thinking that ignorance may well be a good thing when it comes to dying.

This passage raises a number of questions, to which theologians have found no simple answers – why, if Lazarus and his sisters were such good friends of Jesus, didn't Jesus set out straight away to see him and heal him? Why did he hang about for two days before going to see them by which time it was too late? Lazarus had been buried for three days when Jesus finally turned up. And as Martha points out, there would be a 'stench' if his tomb was opened up. Why was Jesus so upset to the point of bursting into tears when he did get there? Why was he 'disturbed' (or 'troubled', in the King James Version)? Why did he thank God for hearing him when he hadn't said anything out loud? Why did he do this showcase of a miracle in front of an emotional crowd weeping and wailing, when so many other times he told people to keep quiet about his healing of their loved ones?

Let's start from Mary, collapsing in front of him when he arrived, in floods of tears. After three days of mourning for her brother, she was it seems going down the path we've all been down in moments of real pain and crisis – the path of "if only" – if only we could put the clock back, if only we hadn't said or done something, if only they hadn't gone... Mary says if only you'd been here, he wouldn't have died. She's torn between faith that he could have cured Lazarus, and anger that he didn't come sooner and heal him. Is that why Jesus was 'disturbed'? He knew that he was going to bring back Lazarus – was he upset that Mary and the others had only got such a little way down the path of belief in him? Jesus knew he didn't have much time before he too was going to face death. In those two days that he waited before setting out, he had been praying, he hadn't forgotten about Lazarus, he'd been praying to God his Father. But he was moved by the grief he saw around him –

these people whom he loved, grieving aloud. He showed all too clearly here that God grieves with us. He shares our hurt, he feels our pain, our anger. Jesus burst into tears. The Word made flesh cries with his friends.

He is still 'disturbed' when he arrives at the tomb, disturbed that people still don't realise what he can and will shortly do. Disturbed that they are asking why he didn't heal Lazarus, not realising that he can do a lot more than heal. It's one of his last chances to show them what he can do.

When they roll the stone aside, Jesus thanks his Father for hearing him. His prayers have been answered – Lazarus isn't a rotting corpse, he's able to stand up and come out of the tomb, still wrapped in his burial cloths.

Imagine what the crowd felt when that happened. When a supposedly dead man walked out of his tomb. It must have been horrifying and joyous all at the same time, an enormous shock. And if no-one believed in Jesus as the Messiah after that, then no-one ever would.

So what do we glean from this miracle? Well, perhaps it is telling us a number of things. That we need to have faith that God is always with us, sharing in our pain as well as our joy, that God doesn't necessarily answer our prayers in the way that we would like, but in different ways. His ways are not our ways. That our narrow little hopes and requests are so often blown away by his generous largescale response. That death is not the end for us – that God can bring life in the most unlikely circumstances. That we are, often unknowingly, used by God for good and sound reasons even if we are completely clueless at the time as to what and why something is happening to us. But that if even Jesus needed to spend time praying and waiting, then how much more do we need to pray and wait for God to act in

his own good time and his own infinitely wiser way. Faith and prayer and patience need to be our bedrocks, not least when we remember all those whom we have known, who have already made that mysterious journey through death to God. May they, and all God's saints, rest in peace and rise in glory.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 3rd Sunday before Advent

7th November 2021

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

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.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Advent Sunday

28th November 2021

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Today is the beginning of the church's new year. As ever, it begins with a season of expectation as we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ in his incarnation. The season also looks forward to his final advent as judge at the end of time. In many ways we have lost sight of the second aspect, but it means Advent gives us a chance to reflect on some fundamental questions of living. That's why clergy were instructed to preach in Advent on the so-called 'Four Last Things' of death, judgment, heaven and hell.

For decades this has meant that the church felt out of step with the rest of society during Advent. While the church was contemplating the 'end times', outside Christmas carols were playing in the streets. So there was a mismatch, not least because people simply didn't have a sense any more of the 'end times' affecting them.

Yet my hunch is that the pandemic has made this less of a mismatch. It feels as though 'end times' are in focus in our society in a way they probably haven't been since the nuclear arms race subsided. Just as the church has more or less given up preaching about the Four Last Things in Advent, society now seems more preoccupied with them. Out of step again.

In our Gospel reading from St Luke today, Jesus refers to the importance of interpreting the signs of the times. There are plenty of those at the moment. The pandemic was viewed by some as a sign that the world was out of control. In parallel, the climate emergency has confronted us with the prospect of a planet no longer able to support human life. And if all that weren't enough, cosmologists now speak of something known as the 'big crunch' in which they foresee the 'big bang' of the universe reversing. That *would* be the end of the world.

All this adds up to a growing secular sense of the 'end times' that is surprisingly in tune with what the biblical authors wrote of centuries ago. Suddenly the church's talk of 'end times' doesn't seem so far out of step with the sense of foreboding many are experiencing today. What, if anything, does the Christian faith have to offer, to help us to live well within these times?

Well, it turns out, quite a lot. Let's look for a moment at the Four Last Things.

Death. Our society does a pretty good job of managing not to think about it most of the time. But the pandemic changed that. People no longer feel 'safe' in the way that they did. Perhaps as a result, there is renewed interest in a Gospel of resurrection, even though not always expressly articulated. (Try standing at any gathering in a dog collar and you will see what I mean.) Resurrection is what the Christian faith has to offer in the face of death. It's a good way of living with the knowledge that all of us one day will come to die.

Judgment. In Normandy there used to be a tradition on Advent Sunday of sending children to run around the fields and hit the haystacks so that all the rats ran out of the reaped harvest. It is quite a good image for the kind of spiritual work we should try to do in Advent. Advent exposes our 'darkness', the faults that are usually more forgivable than the ways in which we try to hide them. Advent encourages us to face up to ourselves, to pray for forgiveness and for the light of God to infuse us as we wait with humility and honesty for the coming of Christ.

The idea of judgment (the Old English word for which is 'doom') is often thought of with a sense of dread. Think of those medieval 'doom' paintings with people being sent downwards or upwards. Judgment makes us think of the things we have got wrong, messed up, wished we hadn't done or wished we had. Yet the Christian message is that God's judgment is inseparable from God's mercy, that they are two sides of the same coin. We should learn to think of judgment as an act of God's grace. The reason we can trust this is that the nature of God has been revealed to us in the form we are best able to understand – that of a human being. One who, in dying on the cross, prayed that his torturers might be forgiven.

Meanwhile, the sense that we will be held to account at the end of the day is a salutary one. The spiritual writer Gerard Hughes suggested that if we want to know how to live well, we should start by writing our own obituary. How would be wish to be remembered? What would we need to do with our lives in order to be remembered like that? When we reflect that none of us knows how long we may have to make those changes, it becomes an urgent question.

Heaven. Our reading today from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians ends with an encouragement to keep their hearts holy in order to be found blameless at the second coming of Christ. It's a traditional vision, though in some ways a limited one. There is an idea in contemporary theology that offers a different perspective when we think about heaven. It is known as 'Living God's future now'. It's about creating a community in which the virtues of heaven are practised on earth now. If we will allow the Holy Spirit to make us instruments of God's peace, we will be 'living God's future now'.

That idea also seems to me bound up with how we prepare for God's judgment and mercy. I'd like to suggest we try an exercise this Advent, an exercise in living God's future now. Perhaps the thing human beings crave most is forgiveness. It's the thing Jesus kept saying to people who came to him in need: 'Your sins are forgiven'. He discerned that even if they appeared to want something else, such as physical healing, underneath forgiveness was what they longed for most from the one who called himself the Son of Man.

Forgiveness. What if we started now? What if we decided to forgive someone who has wronged us, not because they deserve it or have even asked for it, but because we believe God forgives us, and we know that we don't deserve it or even ask for it most of the time. We can see the beauty and the freedom in that, and we want, however hesitatingly, to offer it to others.

So, over the next four weeks, let's try forgiving one person. It may not even be someone living now. Try forgiving them, not because they deserve it but because they don't. Then try the same with another person. And then another. And we may discover that we begin to walk more lightly, live more fully in the

present, not ruminating on the past. Giving attention to other people, not always preoccupied with ourselves. We may even get to a point when we are living so fully in the present that we are able to give full attention to the birth of Christ at Christmas. And give thanks with our whole heart, a heart we will know by then to be ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.

I've left one out. Hell. Based on what we have been thinking about, I'll leave you to work out what that is.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Christmas Eve - Midnight Mass

24th December 2021

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

I remember once hearing a radio announcer say in a mock serious voice on 22nd June: 'the nights are starting to draw in now'. His colleague gave a howl of protest. For my part, I always find it a relief to get beyond 21st December, the day that contains the shortest amount of daylight in the northern hemisphere. I know a number of people who suffer from SAD (seasonal affective disorder), on whom the dark afternoons and evenings of winter have a particularly strong impact. It can be a really difficult time. It's no coincidence that the early church began to celebrate the coming of Christ, the Light of the World, at the darkest point of the year.

We also use the concept of darkness figuratively to describe things that make us sad. We speak of living through dark times, of dark behaviour, dark experiences. This Christmas, once more much of the world has been plunged into uncertainty, along with its close relative anxiety, about spiralling case numbers in the pandemic, the prospect of overwhelmed medical services, renewed restrictions on the ability to travel, the inability to be with loved ones whom we long to see and hold again. It's hard to hold onto hope, to a sense that all will be well. We find ourselves asking, like a child shortly after beginning a long journey, 'Are we nearly there yet?'

The writers of the Scriptures, too, understood the figurative power of references to light and darkness. The Book of Genesis begins with the words: 'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. … Then God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light. And God saw that the light was good'. Beginning his Gospel account, St John uses similar imagery: 'In the beginning was the Word … All things came into being through him … What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'

If I were only allowed to take one Bible sentence to a desert island, it would be that last one. It is the most powerful statement I know of why it makes sense to go to church on Sundays. It is the most powerful statement I know of the goodness and resilience built deep into the heart of creation, the assurance of a God who knows the human condition from within, including all its sorrows, and who holds onto us through and beyond them. The most powerful statement of hope for a world in pain.

As this year draws to a close, the problems of the world seem to threaten to overwhelm us – the climate emergency, the effect of ever-growing economic imbalances, the persistence of violence and injustice, quite apart from the ravages of the pandemic. The problems are just too big, too complex and too urgent for us to be able to glimpse how they might be solved. Yet as John the Evangelist understood and was inspired to write, the defining event in human history was the coming of the light of Christ. Two thousand years ago the writer glimpsed that subsequent events of human history would come to be seen by this light, which would shine even in the darkest places. That it would light the

way for human communities to become kinder, that it would inspire societies to become more generous than a focus on narrow self-interest and survival of the fittest would otherwise bring about. Even though in our European societies relatively few still profess an active Christian faith, the heritage of our Christian ancestors is such that people still believe it matters that the hungry are fed, the poor are cared for, children are educated, the sick have access to healthcare, and the very young and very old receive nurture and care. John saw that the light of Christ's life, teaching, death and resurrection would continue to point the way to abundant life, scattering fear and bringing hope even in the face of disaster, long after the eye witnesses to his story were gone. That's why he introduced his account of the story by painting it on a cosmic canvas.

John points also to the effect of our response. Christina Rossetti, in her carol 'In the bleak midwinter', describes it as the giving of our hearts. What Christmas fundamentally celebrates is people being willing to give their hearts in response to the God who seeks them out, the God who in some mysterious way we experience as personal, as a claim on our hearts. The baby in the manger (who does not feature in St John's account, only in Luke's and Matthew's) is one without power or protection. The only power he does have is to draw out of people what is in them, the longing to love and care for the vulnerable. Loving and caring for the vulnerable is what the adult Jesus spent much of his ministry teaching people to do.

The community that Jesus creates around him is one which challenges the barriers that prevent us from responding to one another. It was, and is, a community based on a common willingness to respond to God and to one another. All over the world, despite lockdowns and pandemic restrictions,

communities like this one have formed online to do just that – or, as John would put it, to 'testify to the light'. For the church is a community that, whilst still a human one, is also a community that carries (however falteringly and however often it fails) God's vision for the world and for humanity. John doesn't pull any punches when he writes about the kinship of Jesus which such a community can bring about: 'But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become the children of God.'

That's an extraordinary claim. But the reason John makes it is his belief that there is something at work which we barely understand but sometimes glimpse, in the goodness and resilience we discern at the heart of creation, something that has been pouring itself out for ever, which no darkness can ever overcome. Something pouring itself out for *us*, without limit and without end. Light from light. Or, in John's words, 'fullness [from which] we have all received, grace upon grace.'

Light from light. That's the immeasurable gift we are given at Christmas - without limit and without end. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Christmas Eve – 24th December 2021

Aix-en-Provence

Reader Jane Quarmby

Christmas is here again, whether we are ready or not! Even those who profess not to believe in Christ seem to have no difficulty in taking a holiday, meeting up with friends and family, eating and drinking special meals, partying and giving gifts. Magazines are full of advice for the exhausted, tired out by the work involved in all this frivolity and emphasis on togetherness and enjoyment. It's a time of huge family pressure, leading to arguments and strife, and forced niceness to people one doesn't actually like very much can add to the tensions.

A far cry from the story of Christ's birth, where his parents are forced to travel a long way from family and home, just as Mary is due to give birth. Bureaucracy rode roughshod over family matters even 2000 years ago, as the Roman emperor decided he needed to reform the tax system and thus unknowingly fulfilled the prophecy made years before, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

It's here that our popular Nativity story veers away from the Gospel, and is brightly coloured by our well known and much loved carols. Our cribs that we have at home and in church, with all the animals in the stable, are lovely. But Luke just says that while they were there, Mary had her baby and wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them. There's no mention of an inn – Bethlehem was too small to have an inn. There's no mention of the animals, just the manger, appropriated by Mary as a cot. Many of the houses then would have kept their animals in the undercroft, an early form of underfloor heating for the family living above. It would have been a warm, safe place, but there's no reason to believe that Mary and Joseph were in there along with the animals. We have a number of mangers for our sheep and cows. They range from metal baskets that clip to the wall, to

sturdy wooden arrangements on legs. Nice fresh hay and a blanket over the top (hay is scratchy stuff) and they would make a safe and cosy cot.

But it's hardly 5 star luxury for this special child's arrival into the world. A makeshift cot, no proper lodging, humble parents far from home, no female relatives at hand to help the young mother. We can only hope that either Joseph knew what to do and help her, or some kindly lady from the village was at hand.

And continuing this theme of humble beginnings, the first people to be told about this holy baby were shepherds out in the fields guarding their sheep through the night. Not the aristocracy, the governors and emperors, the smart and wealthy people. Working farmers, guarding their precious flocks from prowling wolves, bears and thieves. They wouldn't have been welcomed in a wealthy household, mucky, unwashed and reeking of sheep. Which is an acquired taste to say the least. But without them, stock losses would have been crippling We have wolves at home – we saw one not 200 metres from a friend's house last week, and they can decimate a flock, inflicting horrific injuries on defenceless animals and killing them. So shepherds were and are vital, but they wouldn't be most people's first choice of early visitors to see their new baby. But this baby has come to be the ultimate shepherd. He won't spend his time with the glitterati, he's going to be with his sheep, his people, protecting, caring and leading them away from harm and into the light.

It's a mark of how faithful those shepherds were that once they got over the shock of seeing the angels, they dropped everything and went into the village to see this baby. They had nothing to give other than their admiration and belief in him but it's not every day that God shows his power to people in such a way – these men and boys saw not one angel but "a vast host of others – the armies of heaven". It must have been terrifying. There you are, in the dark, listening out for your dogs barking to alert you to threats, when the whole area is lit up by an angel, then hordes of angels. No wonder they left their flocks and shot off into the village, risking losing their animals and possibly their jobs, but seized by the news that the Messiah has finally arrived. They knew their scripture, they like the rest of Israel had been waiting a long time for their saviour to arrive.

And now the significance of the manger comes into play. A shepherd knows exactly what a manger is and what it looks like – and that was the sign the angel

gave them. A sign familiar to a shepherd. A baby wrapped in strips of cloth was a much loved and well cared for baby, a sight very much at odds with one lying in a manger. But this baby will not be what people expect. He won't be a great military leader, or a politician, or an emperor like Augustus, born into an elite family, related to Julius Caesar and named by him as his successor. Augustus fought his way to the top and declared himself Emperor and by association with Caesar declared himself divine, paving the way for all sorts of resistance and complications with people who worshipped God. But he was a great Roman ruler – he brought in the Pax Romana, an unheard of two centuries of peace in the Mediterranean, enlarged Rome's rule and brought in roads, new tax systems, and strong government.

What a contrast between Augustus and Jesus. The people of Israel were looking forward to a man like Augustus, but one of them, to lead them into freedom and save them from the oppression of so many neighbours who over the years had invaded them. Instead their saviour was a little boy, born to a carpenter and his wife far from home and visited by shepherds. God's idea of a saviour, a Messiah, wasn't what people expected. But he would grow up to be the saviour of the whole of humanity, if only they would welcome him. His was not to be the way of the sword, of the great military commander, but of teaching a gentler, kinder way of living, with miraculous powers of healing and a warm welcome to all, regardless of their background or way of life. He came to be a shepherd of his people.

A good shepherd cares for his flock, lives with them night and day, feeds them, nurses them, and protects them from those who mean them harm. His sheep will follow him anywhere, crowd round him to be fed.

If Christ is our shepherd, then how much more should we follow him than do sheep their shepherd? How much more should we clamour to be fed by him, spiritually and inwardly, how much more should we be eager to be with him always? How much do we rely on our shepherd to rescue us when we are in trouble, to lead us through life and help us avoid all the pitfalls?

But that's in the future for our baby in the manger tonight. Tonight he can rest secure in the love of his mother, cosy in his make do crib, admired and worshipped by the poor and humble. Greatness will come, but for now he can

doze and rest content. As we marvel at the wonder of this nativity, let's not forget the real meaning of Christmas. As John Betjeman put it

"And is it true? And is it true,….

The Maker of the stars and sea
Become a Child on earth for me?"

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – First Sunday of Christmas – 26th December 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Our New Testament reading this morning is one that needs a bit of context round it. It's the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

We don't know much about Stephen. He was an early convert to Christianity, appointed with six others to run a food relief programme in order to free up time for the apostles to preach and teach. He was noted by the community as being 'of good standing, full of the Holy Spirit, wisdom and faith'. Stephen was also a radical, and outspoken. This led people to complain about him to the ruling council, the Sanhedrin, before whom he was falsely accused of blasphemy. His defence speech ends with a strong attack on his accusers and on the ruling body itself, pointing out that by putting Jesus to death they have shown themselves to be no better than their predecessors who persecuted the prophets. The result is that he infuriates his hearers and is condemned to death by stoning - the first person recorded as giving his life for his faith in Christ. As he dies, he prays for his killers that God will not hold their sin against them.

People have often wondered why this story is told on the day immediately following Christmas Day. The explanation usually given is one which the

playwright T S Eliot voiced in his play *Murder in the Cathedral* about the martyrdom of Archbishop Thomas Becket (which is in turn commemorated on 29th December).

Eliot's Becket, preaching on Christmas morning, reflects that the Christmas Day mass is at the same time a celebration of Jesus's birth and a re-enactment of his passion and death. He notes the paradox of it: 'For who in the world will both mourn and rejoice at once and for the same reason?' Yet this is part of the Christian mystery. Just as we remember Christ coming among us in human flesh, we also remember how that flesh was broken. We are shown from the beginning not only Christ's own path of suffering, but also that pattern repeating itself in the lives of some of his followers down the ages. It's a reminder that we are all called to be martyrs, for 'martyr' simply means 'witness'. We are invited to tell the story afresh in each generation, even if it lands us in trouble.

That's the traditional explanation for the timing of the 'Feast of Stephen'. But in reflecting on it this week, and particularly on the pairing with Stephen's story of our Old Testament reading today from the Second Book of Chronicles, I found myself wondering whether there might not be another explanation - a more positive reason why we are given Stephen's story so soon after the birth of Christ. For there is a striking difference between the words spoken by Zechariah as he is stoned to death, 'May the Lord see and avenge', and the words spoken by Stephen, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'. And the difference is Christ.

It is Jesus – and his death – of which Stephen is reminded as the violence he has unleashed by his outspokenness rains down on him. 'Filled with the Spirit',

Stephen gazes into heaven and has a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And in that instant he remembers two of Jesus's sayings from the cross: 'Lord, into your hands I commend my spirit', and 'Father, forgive them, for they do know not what they are doing'.

The difference between the two responses is total. Zechariah's all too human response risks perpetuating a cycle of violence. Stephen's response, inspired by Jesus, breaks the cycle of violence. Breaking the cycle of violence is fundamental to the significance of Jesus's passion and death, and to the human behaviour which this extraordinary Gospel has inspired ever since.

I wonder if that's why Stephen's story is told on the next day. Because of the newness of the 'Father, forgive'. We are fast forwarded to the crucifixion, and thus to our redemption, on the second day of Jesus's life. We are shown how a transformation of human response is possible even in the midst of terrible suffering. How the love that was born at Christmas underpins that transformation – a love so radical that Jesus insists we must show it even to our enemies.

That's what makes the difference, every day of our lives. Can we bring ourselves to break cycles of violence – however large or small – when we find ourselves part of them? If we stop to think of Stephen, who stopped to think of Christ, might we in our turn, just possibly, become part of a chain of response for good? Might that be the reason Stephen's story is remembered right next to the birth of Christ? For his story *is* remembered. Stephen is the first, yet only the first, person who shows themselves capable of such reckless loving. Those who have shown it since are far too numerous to list, so I will just mention one.

Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch woman interned at Ravensbrück for helping Jewish citizens escape the Nazis in her home town of Haarlem during the Second World War. Her book, *The Hiding Place*, tells the story of her experiences of internment, particularly the illness and death of her sister Betsie, the strength of her sister's Christian faith and a vision that she had of what reconciliation would be like after the War ended. After the War Corrie found herself putting her sister's vision into practice when she was asked to run a rehabilitation centre in the Netherlands, and later in Germany itself.

It was there, one day in 1946, that she was invited to give a talk and found herself face to face with one of the guards who had been particularly brutal to her sister. She writes:

> *It was at the church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man… He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there – the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, my sister Betsie's pain-blanched face.*
>
> *He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. 'How grateful I am for your message, Fraülein,' he said. …*
>
> *His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often … the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.*
>
> *Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.*
>
> *I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness.*
>
> *As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.*

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on his. When he tells us to love our enemies, he gives, along with the command, the love itself.

I think that's what happened to Stephen. And this week I found myself wondering whether, because it's so unbelievably difficult to do, that's why he is given a place of remembrance right next to the birthday of our Lord.

Maybe we should leave the last word to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whose death at the age of 90 was announced this morning. A towering witness in this generation, who embodied the power of non-violent resistance. He wrote:

'Goodness is stronger than evil.
Love is stronger than hate.
Light is stronger than darkness.
Life is stronger than death.
Victory is ours through him who loved us.'

Amen.