ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Epiphany Sunday – 2nd January 2022

The Reverend Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

The Epiphany is "a feast worthy of most devout celebration", exclaimed Augustine of Hippo in 412. At that time, it was still a "young" festival in liturgical calendar of the Church, introduced only a few decades before, to celebrate the manifestation, or showing forth, of the glory of God in Jesus Christ, the Eternal Word of God made flesh.

Just as the showing forth of the glory of God in Christ takes many different forms, so, across the world this week, Christians from different traditions will commemorate many different events.

While Western churches remember the coming of the Magi, wise men from the East, to worship at the cradle of the Infant Christ, at the same time, in the East, will be celebrated Christ's birth in Armenian and Russian churches, and Christ's Baptism in Greek and Romanian churches. We shouldn't forget Christ's first recorded miracle, the changing of water into wine at the wedding at Cana, or the conversion of St Paul following the Epiphany he experiences on the road to Damascus, which the Church celebrates on 25th January. The season ends with the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Candlemas): the Christ child who had been manifested to the shepherds and to the wise men at his birth is now recognised by Simeon and Anna.

A great diversity of commemorations, yet all tied together by one common theme: the shining forth, the "Epiphany" of the divine glory of Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of God, the Eternal Word of God, made flesh. Thus, these many commemorations of Epiphany make up a continuing meditation upon the meaning of Christmas - the mystery of God with us, God in our flesh, God manifest in human life, restoring and transforming it by the grace and truth he brings.

The journey of the Magi, as told in the Gospel of Matthew, has fascinated people for two millennia and has been subject to more legendary additions and traditions than any other part of the Nativity story. Over the centuries, the wise men have become Kings, and their supposed remains rest now in a golden shrine in the cathedral of Cologne, in Germany. For many centuries, believers have come from all over Europe to venerate the relics in the shrine, praying for faith, strength and trust to follow the path of the Kings.

The Magi have become part of the popular culture. Many of us give and receive Christmas card depicting vaguely oriental dignitaries either following a star on camelback, or beside Christ's manger, bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

In secular France, bakeries have on display the traditional Kings' Cake all throughout the month of January, and countless are the occasions to indulge in the ritual associated to it - finding the charm and / or the bean hidden in the cake and so getting to wear a crown.

In Central Europe, on Epiphany Day, star singers, carrying a star on a rod and sometimes dressed up colourfully as the wise men and their retinue, walk from house to house and sing. They sometimes offer a blessing of the home, inscribed with chalk on the top of the door frame: C-M-B. The three letters are an acronym for a Latin blessing, *Christus mansionem benedicat*, which means, "May Christ bless this house.", and, at the same time, they are the initials of the traditional names of the Magi, Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar.

Whichever event it commemorates, the Epiphany is a colourful festival. It is a season for offering hospitality, just as the Holy Family did, when the Magi appeared unexpectedly at their door. It is a season of seeking, journeying, wondering and offering one's gifts.

The Gospel passages read during the Epiphany season recount personal Epiphanies: even if they open to the mystery of Christ's divinity, they are meaningful for the lives of those who are the recipients of these revelations: the shepherds, the wise men, John the Baptist, Saint Paul, the wedding guests at Cana, Simeon and Anna.

I think we often fail to recognise the Epiphanies in our lives. They so often begin in an absence, in a deep longing and desire. And we, so often, deny the absence or cover it up. If we only dared to name the absence – then we could "observe the star at its rising" and, perhaps, set out on a journey.

What deep yearning led the wise men to travel so far, accepting unforeseen obstacles?

In a beautiful sermon in verse, originally accompanied by music, which Romanos the Melodist, a deacon, poet and hymn writer in the sixth century wrote for the Nativity of Christ, we hear a conversation between Mary and Jesus when the Magi came to their door in Bethlehem:

[Mary] bowed low
and worshipped the offspring of her womb and with tears,
she said, "Great, my Child,
great is all that you have done for me in my poverty;
for see, Magi are outside seeking you.
The kings of the East
seek your face,
and the rich among your people beg to see you,
for truly your people are those
to whom you have been made known as
a little Child, God before the ages."

Jesus the Christ and truly our God
secretly touched his mother's mind
saying, "Bring in those I have brought by my word,
for it is my word which shone on those who were seeking me.
To the senses it is a star,
but to the mind a power." – Kontakion of the Nativity

The star the wise men followed was the word of Christ, Romanos says. They never travelled alone. All along, Christ was with them, calling them to his house. His word, his presence, appeared to their hearts as a longing and desire.

We are ourselves on this journey which the Magi have undertaken long before us. A journey that has started with a deep yearning – for truth or for beauty or for justice or for peace or for healing or for love or for fellowship … a yearning so deep, so burning, that it awakened in us a sense that our lives were not complete and that there is nothing for it but to follow the star. Whatever we might name as our longing, that is the beginning of our epiphany. It is not emptiness. It is a guiding star that can illumine our life. It is a beacon beckoning us home.

It is God's calling to set out on a long and convoluted journey of seeking him in the most unlikely places, a journey of unexpected challenges and unexpected joys.

Our world is not bereft of God's presence. God leaves hints and signs, a trail to be discovered by those who seek to pursue the holy in the midst of life. Christ allows himself to be found by those who seek him.

Having come to Jesus after a long journey, the Magi bring gifts. The journey of life should end in freely giving, without expecting anything in return – this is a sure sign that one has found Christ.

We too, when we find ourselves in the presence of God - a presence hidden in the goodness of the world He has created, and in the suffering of this world too - we should lay our burden low at his feet, remove our crowns of self-sufficiency, open our treasure chests and offer gifts, and ask God to transform these gifts, to transform our lives, to help us become all he made us to be, to make us anew in Christ.

God has created us for a life journey towards him. Through joy, sorrow and hardship, each one of us goes their way. May we have faith, strength and trust to follow the path the Magi have taken; to follow the star and let it take us to the place where Christ dwells; to stand at the door with the wise men, and listen to the child tell his mother, "Bring them in. I brought them here by my Word."

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – First Sunday of Epiphany - Baptism of Christ

9th January 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

We might easily get confused with the chronology in these Sundays after Christmas. Last week we celebrated the coming of the Magi to pay homage to the infant Jesus. In three weeks' time, at Candlemas, we will celebrate the still infant Jesus being presented in the Temple. But this Sunday we suddenly fast forward to the thirty year old Jesus, at his baptism in the River Jordan by John, and next week we will again see the thirty year old Jesus, in the synagogue at Nazareth, announcing that Isaiah's vision of the 'year of the Lord's favour' has arrived. What these readings have in common, as Roxana noted last week, is that they are all examples of the revelation of Jesus to those who had, in different ways, longed for his coming.

The story of Jesus's baptism comes in all four Gospels, so it is foundational to our faith. It is also foundational to the Church, as we see from the architecture of its buildings. There is always a font, usually near the door as a symbol of its marking the entry into faith. It's interesting to compare the different size and shape of fonts in churches. The one here in Marseille is beautiful but, like many, it's fairly small. This week I came across an article by Canon Mark Oakley (a

former Archdeacon of this Diocese) called 'Forget the Birdbath'. He points out that, in ancient churches, baptisteries used to be enormous – sometimes a separate room, even a separate building. There is a good example in the Cathedral at Aix, built in the 6th century. It is one of the baptisteries you went right down into, like Jesus in the River Jordan.

In the early church some fonts were even designed like tombs. This is because, from earliest times, an association was made by the Church between baptism and the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus goes down into the depths, and comes up to hear the voice that he is a loved child, embraced and held for ever by God. The divine love of which we are assured in baptism is stronger than the grave and will not let us go. Nonetheless, an old way of living and understanding has to die before the new life can enter us. St Cyril of Jerusalem wrote: 'When you went down into the water it was like the night and you could see nothing, but when you came up again it was like finding yourself in the day. That one moment was your death and your birth, that saving water was both your grave and your mother.' That's why some fonts were designed to resemble the womb.

Mark Oakley writes about the baptistery in the church of St John Lateran in Rome, designed to hold a great amount of water, the amount needed (as he puts it) 'to wash your regrets and failures off, to cleanse your humanity, to drown all the damaging messages we can transmit to others and ourselves, in order that we might hear the voice of love from heaven'. He adds: 'Unfortunately, today you also find there a sort of Italian bathtub of the seventeenth century and across this a wooden plank and on the plank a small bowl with a tiny dish on it in which baptisms are celebrated today. This is a sad reflection of how we can reduce, literally, the way we celebrate baptism and

consequently understand baptism'. No womb-like font, where nourishment and growth were provided to a soul in development. No tomb-like font, where people were immersed into the depths and drenched in grace. Just 'an apologetic pudding bowl or birdbath with a few polite drips of water'.

Baptism is partly about shedding our former selves. Visiting a large baptistery like the one at Aix is a good reminder of this, especially when we feel sullied, guilty when we have made such a mess of things that it is difficult to know how to begin again. We need to remember that we were cleansed in baptism once and for all, and that however much we get things wrong this can never be taken away from us. It's why we can only be baptised once. That's the power of God.

Baptism is also about being assured of the love of God, wherever we are and for all time. When Jesus goes down into the river, all the voices around him are drowned out. When he comes up again he hears the only voice that matters, that of God the Father, the voice to which he goes on to attend throughout his ministry. I wonder which voices we listen to. How often do we stop to listen to the voice of God?

When Jesus emerges from the water there is also a dove, like the Spirit which hovered over the waters of creation in the Book of Genesis, like the dove that brought peace to Noah as the waters of the flood receded, confirming a covenant of love into the future. An embodiment of the Holy Spirit, the divine energy that drives all the events of Jesus's life. I wonder how attuned we are to the promptings of the Spirit in ours.

Above all, we need to remember the words from Chapter 43 of Isaiah which we heard this morning: 'you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.' That's the promise of our baptism. As Jesus rises out of the water he hears similar words: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' Isaiah 43 is the reading that has spoken in so many ways into these years of pandemic, and speaks to us still:

> Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
> I have called you by name, you are mine.
> When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
> and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
> when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
> and the flame shall not consume you. …
> You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.'

They are words that apply to all our struggles – physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, professional, social – all. In some ways they are all we need to know. They are the words which Jesus heard, coming up out of the water to begin the ministry that would lead him into controversy and danger, through suffering, death and beyond. They are the words each of us can hear now, as we gather at the altar to receive Christ, the living bread. And they are the words that will carry us through whatever we have to face:

> 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you …
> You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.'

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Candlemas (with Baptism) – 30th January 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

Today is a day of joy and hope. The joy and hope that the revelation of the Christ Child in the Temple brings, even if the words 'joy' and 'hope' do not appear in Luke's account. For us at All Saints, this morning, the joy and hope that the baptism of a child brings to a family and to a community of faith.

Luke's account of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple focuses on the Child, but it also describes the responses of the adults around him.

Mary and Joseph must have been in a solemn mood on that day, as many parents are when they bring their child to be baptised. Jewish law taught that God was to be honoured in everyone's rising up and lying down, in going out and coming in, in daily life and in special events, through rituals that acknowledged that life is sacred and that the divine is present everywhere and at every time. Trusting in the promises of God, Mary and Joseph go to the Temple to carry out, faithfully, the practices of their faith. They bring their child to the place of God's dwelling, to present him to the Lord. He belongs to God - God claims him as his Son.

Simeon and Anna bring a new dimension of expectation and fervour to the story. They recognise in this child born in poverty the one who will embody the consolation and salvation of God. Through the presence of this child, God gives the world the Good News.

They cannot but respond to Christ's presence, which brings light, peace and boundless freedom.

This morning, we have gathered as a community to celebrate Miahy's baptism and to respond to it. Every baptism is meaningful not only for the candidate, their family and friends, but also for all of us. As a church family, we will be reminded of how God works in our lives through his grace, which we have received in our own baptism and which is an ever-present reality in our lives. We

have a chance this morning to reflect on the moment when we entered into the life of Christ and to ponder how to live up to the great gifts God has given us.

There is endless comfort in knowing that we have been presented and received by God. The world in which we adults live is not always friendly or generous, but we are assured that we belong to God. It is reported that Martin Luther used to say "I am baptised" when he was plagued with fear and anxiety, with doubt and discouragement. He didn't fight his own demons saying "I believe" or "I have faith", but "I am baptised". I would think that by this he meant: "I belong to God – God claims me as his child."

Baptism is indeed the ultimate expression of how we belong to God. There is no power that can separate us from God's love. In baptism, God will say: "Miahy, you are my daughter, my beloved, in you I take great delight."

Yet baptism is only the beginning of a journey. Newly baptised children will grow up, and they will be faced with the same decisions and choices we all face: to live for Christ or for the world? Did anyone say that the path we journey on as Christians is uncomplicated and smooth? Did Simeon say to Mary that her child will encounter no opposition or rejection? I don't think so.

That is why we have a duty to surround Miahy and her family with love, prayers and support. I don't know if it takes a village to raise a child, but it takes a family of faith to encourage and nurture her mysterious relationship with Christ that begins in her baptism.

Parents, grandparents and godparents, God has prepared a gift for you in Miahy's baptism. Over the years, you will see the life of Christ unfolding in her and this will give you very great joy. Yet you also receive great responsibility today, for in this complex world of ours the life in Christ is fragile and needs to be protected.

You will always be the first role models for Miahy – from you she will learn how to persevere when she has setbacks, how to get up when she falls. She will learn to be patient and compassionate, caring and loving.

Protect Miahy's faith with your own faith, strengthen it with your example, encourage and cherish it with your love. The words that you'll be saying shortly during the baptism, in Miahy's name – treasure them, and ponder them in your

hearts. For you are on one of the greatest adventures a family can know: watching Miahy grow, become strong and filled with wisdom.

May the favour of God be always upon her.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Fourth Sunday before Lent

6th February 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Yesterday, at the International Mass for Seafarers streamed from the Basilica of Notre-Dame de la Garde in Marseille, we remembered Père René Tanguy, who died last week aged 91. Père Tanguy helped to found AMAM, the Association Marseillaise d'Accueil des Marins, that runs the Seamen's Club in the port here where members of our congregation volunteer. It was said of Père Tanguy that everything he took on was guided by a desire to serve the poor, especially seafarers in difficulty. It was his particular vocation, which he spent his time in Marseille seeking to live out.

Our Old Testament and Gospel readings today are both about vocation. Isaiah is called to be the prophet who will warn Israel of impending disaster. Simon Peter is called by Jesus to follow him and, in due course, become the rock on which his church will be built. Both responded by pointing out immediately that they were not worthy of the task allotted to them. ('I am a man of unclean lips.' … 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!') It is a normal human response to the realisation that we are in the presence of the divine. We see it often in the Bible: both Moses and Paul reacted in a similar way. Ordinary people, given extraordinary things to do. Knowing they are not worthy of the task, but doing

it anyway. For in the end it is not about us, but about what God wants us to do. And it is at just such moments of painful self-knowledge that the commission comes. 'Do not be afraid', Jesus says to Peter. And 'they left everything and followed him'.

Seventy years ago today, a young woman learned that on the death of her father she had inherited an office of heavy responsibility that she would be destined to fulfil for the rest of her life. Queen Elizabeth II, who was a long way from home when she received the news, arrived back to face countless days of scrutiny of her response to her unique calling. She asked people to 'pray that God would give [her] wisdom and strength to carry out the promises' she would make at her Coronation. Since then, she has never ceased to live out that calling. There have been times when the way ahead was clear, times when it was extremely difficult. But for seventy years she has kept faithful to the living out of her vocation.

In her Christmas broadcasts, the Queen has often spoken of how she has found strength through her Christian faith. She speaks movingly of the inspiration she finds in the teachings of Christ, of what it means to try to follow his example. With simplicity and sincerity, she offers the assurance that anyone can do this – they don't have to be royal – and that following Christ's example brings a simplicity of heart and purpose that can free us to live life to the full. I have noticed how she conveys the sense that life is about call and response. Next month we will celebrate that moment of the greatest call and response of all: the Annunciation of our Lord to his mother Mary. An ordinary woman, given something extraordinary to do. 'How shall this be?' 'God will make it possible.' 'Be it unto me.'

Vocation. It's a word people sometimes mistake for referring just to ordained ministry in the church. But that's way too narrow. Every human being has a vocation, one that is uniquely theirs. Watch any individual being interviewed, any sports personality, artist or musician, any doctor or teacher, any ordinary individual who has responded to a call to do something extraordinary while going about their daily life – rescuing victims of a natural disaster, or giving something up to help others in distress. 'How shall this be?', asks the interviewer. The answer given often conveys a sense that it was somehow a power beyond themselves that made it possible, and that all they could do was go with its flow. 'Be it unto me.'

Vocation is about a sense of who we really are, what we are really here to do. It is something the pandemic has taught us to consider more thoughtfully. To what, and to whom, should we give our time, energy and resources? What might be the thing that only we can do, with our unique mix of skills, experience and motivation? We need to listen for the answer, to listen - as St Benedict would say - with 'the ear of the heart'. In a recent interview the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, said that at the end of his life he did not expect God would say to him, 'Why weren't you St Francis of Assisi, or Mother Teresa?', but 'Why weren't you Stephen?' Why weren't you fully the person I created you in love to be?

Jesus's call, God's call, has always been to ordinary people – fishermen mending their nets - and it is still the case. He wants us, ordinary people, to use our skills and gifts in following his example. Today you have each been given a list of tasks for which volunteers are needed in our chaplaincy. Please have a look at it and

see what you might be able to offer. As St Paul wrote to the church in Rome, 'we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We all have gifts that differ' (Romans 12.4-6). You are all needed for these tasks, each one of you.

In closing, I'd like to tell you about Mallie. I was reminded of her the other day when someone in the chaplaincy asked me to say grace before a meal. The grace I used was one which this lady said whenever she had people to supper in her home. In the 1980s Mallie arrived in London from the Bahamas. She was a widow, with children who had grown up and left home. She joined a church that attracted people from different parts of the world, often at times of transition in their lives, arriving to work or study in a city that was new to them, where they didn't know many people. Looking round the church one day, Mallie found herself asking: 'What can I do about this?' She began to invite them for meals. Twice a week, for over thirty years, she invited people to supper in her apartment. It became her way of living out the Christian Gospel. Her response to the miraculous catch of fish.

I was in Mallie's apartment on the night of September 11th, 2001. She didn't possess a television, so she hadn't seen the pictures of aircraft being flown deliberately into tower blocks full of people. But her response was the same as it always was: 'What are we going to do about it?'

An ordinary person, called to do extraordinary things. Twice a week for over three decades, until the age of 90, gifting countless souls with generous hospitality, conversation, love and laughter. Over time, it struck me that evenings with Mallie were a little like a foretaste of heaven. I have a feeling she

will be found somewhere just inside its door, notebook in hand, saying: ‘Now, what are you doing on Tuesday?’

The words with which she began each meal were these:

> Heavenly Father,
> in a world where many go hungry, we thank you for food;
> in a world where many are lonely, we thank you for friendship;
> in a world where many despair, we thank you for the hope you have given us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Extraordinary. Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Third Sunday before Lent

13th February 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

A ninth World Happiness Report was released last year. The team who work on the report have a recipe for happiness, with a number of ingredients which, when blended together, result in a nation's feeling happy: gross domestic product per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make one's own life choices, generosity of the population, and corruption levels. Last year, Finland was announced to be the happiest country, and Afghanistan the least happy one.

Happiness is something we all want to experience. It is our inherent and inalienable right to pursue happiness, as the US Declaration of Independence puts it. People go about their personal quests for happiness in very different ways. There isn't much chance that you make use of the World Happiness Report criteria to gauge your blessedness. You probably have your own recipe for lasting happiness – what is the main ingredient? Family, loving and supportive friends, a fulfilling job, a successful career … It is quite likely that in 2022 "good health" would be at the top of the list for many people.

Even if you think that happiness is not easily attainable in your case, there must be something in your life that you could give thanks for. Do you remember to count your blessings every day? Or you'd rather focus on the empty half of your glass? How often do we count our blessings as a church? I am sure we have a rather long litany of woes …

Three recipes for happiness are offered to us this morning. One coming from the book of the prophet Jeremiah: "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord." Another coming from the book of the Psalms: "Blessed

are those who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, whose delight is in the law of the Lord."

At first sight, they both seem to have a vision of life as a journey marked by divergent paths: turn one way, you will be blessed, turn another way, and you will perish. In our 21st century Western society, this would not be easily accepted as a roadmap. In real life, visible happiness does not always flow from trust in the Lord. We will sing later today: "All my hope on God is founded – he doth still my trust renew", but we might do so half-heartedly.

So let us consider the third happiness recipe, which comes from Jesus. Standing among a great crowd of disciples and a great multitude of people who have come to him to be healed, Jesus paints a surprising diptych of parallel blessings and woes. The ingredients of blessedness are poverty, hunger, weeping, being subject to hatred … I am sure the disciples and the crowd did not expect this. In the moral and cultural economy they lived in, which was based on a divine reward system, the poor and the hungry were labelled as being out of favour with God, which brought even more hatred and exclusion. How could Jesus call them blessed? In every age, it is against any logic to congratulate the poor on being poor, the hungry on being hungry.

We didn't expect this either. It sounds raw and provocative. These are not the ingredients we would blend for our happiness cocktail. No self-help book would ever mention this. Poverty and suffering in themselves are neither holy, nor redemptive in the Christian story – Jesus' ministry is all about healing, abundance, liberation, and joy.

Poverty is a wretched condition. I don't know what life in poverty really is, how it feels. I am not in dire need of anything, I live in a comfortable home, my family is safe, I have plenty to eat. But, intellectually, I can say that poverty equals physical suffering, psychological anxiety, social scorn. Surely, 21st century poverty is not as extensive, deep or hopeless as in first century Palestine. Or is it?

We might not be used to seeing shocking poverty in our neighbourhoods. It could be for us only literature or film stuff, like the conditions portrayed in *Slumdog Millionaire*, which we could label as hyperbolic. What don't make breaking news or front page headlines are realities such as the fact that three quarters of the population in Lebanon lives in poverty. Afghan families sell their daughters into slavery or marriage so they can feed the other children. Across

the European Union, some 19 million children live in poverty. Quite easily we dismiss economic migration, which is triggered by hunger, terrible living conditions, hopelessness, as not being a compelling reason to travel to our affluent continent. How many times have we heard that Europe cannot house all the misery in the world?

There is certainly a concern in Luke's Gospel for the outcast. We have already heard earlier this year this unusual and radical theme of God's exaltation of poor and hungry people. Mary proclaimed a reversal of fortune in her Magnificat: the Mighty One "brings down the powerful from their thrones, and lifts up the lowly; fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty" (Luke 1.52-53). And, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus announced at Nazareth "good news to the poor" (Luke 4.18).

Therefore, we cannot evade the moral imperative of alleviating poverty, neither as individuals, nor as a Christian family. We are called to have a tangible commitment to ensuring that all of God's people be freed from the privations of hunger, homelessness, and nakedness.

But let us be honest: our thinking about issues of wealth and poverty is done from positions of relative privilege. The poor become an object of our good will, and we try to buy some virtue for ourselves, because we, the carefree and self-sufficient, who do not count our blessings because we have too many, we seem to have been relegated by Jesus on the precarious side of his blessed–woeful diptych.

Listen to what Ambrose of Milan has said: "The earth belongs not to the rich, but to everyone. It is not from your own possessions that you are bestowing alms on the poor, you are but restoring to them what is theirs by right. […] Thus, far from giving lavishly, you are but paying part of your debt."

Jesus does not endorse or glorify poverty and suffering of any kind. Nor does he do a sorting exercise between those who will be saved and those who will not. The "blessings" and the "woes" are addressed to each of us. We invite blessing every time we feel empty and are yearning for God. We invite reorientation when we wrap ourselves in self-satisfaction.

Jesus addresses us an invitation to discipleship and an invitation to the Kingdom of God that reverses almost everything we know of how things work. God creates a realm in which no one is poor or hungry or mourning or reviled at the very same time that others are rich, well-fed, laughing and honoured. God

promises to remedy the coexistence of these two opposite circumstances, and, as disciples, we are called to address them in our own lives.

But we have first to recognise how counter-intuitive are God's priorities and promises, and, as the psalmist and Jeremiah encourage us to do, admit the frailty and precariousness of living outside trust in him.

Are we, as a church, deeply hungry for the level of transformation implied in the Kingdom of God? Are we ready to accept our poverty and vulnerability? Bereft and vulnerable in the world's eyes, God will, all the more, bless us with the fullness of his mercy and grace. In response, we should think afresh about how, as a vulnerable community, we could become an instrument of God's hospitality for the afflicted. We should think how we can be, in the words of Teresa of Avila, "the hands with which God blesses all the world".

May God who offers both comfort and challenge grant us the grace to learn the meaning of his blessings.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 1st Sunday of Lent

6th March 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

Can you believe that we already have a tenth of our Lent journey behind us? And I haven't finished yet pondering the Church's invitation on Ash Wednesday to 'observe a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word' – and to adjust my to-do list for Lent accordingly.

Over the next six weeks, many people will engage creatively with the Lent tradition. Some will continue the ancient practice of giving something up as a way of identifying with Christ's forty days of fasting in the wilderness. Others may add something to their life: more time spent in prayer, more attentiveness and generosity towards those in need. Others may claim more quiet time and space for themselves. It could be a time to sit with our hungers, our wants, and learn what they teach us. Can we hunger and still live? Lack and still be generous? A time to learn what we are really famished for – friendship, meaning, quality time spent with our families, time spent with God …

With a whole month between Candlemas and Ash Wednesday, I had plenty of time to get ready: I piled up books recommended by colleagues, friends, and archbishops, enrolled for our Lent group, put the 'Live Lent' app on my phone, and also got a hard copy of it, prepared action songs with the children at school to launch Lent, planned more time outdoors to contemplate God's creation (and get a little exercise), promised myself to be more committed to decluttering my home… So I thought I was ready.

And then, for the past two weeks, I spent so much time watching and reading the news that it felt like inhabiting a very uncomfortable place, a place of solitude, danger, fear, and disorientation. A wilderness.

And so it was that this year's Lenten journey began in this wilderness.

We know, don't we, that Lent is a challenging time. Most of us have comfortable and secure lives. Who'd like them to be challenged? So we'd rather watch with some detachment how Jesus fasts and is tempted.

Yet we cannot but begin our journey with Christ in the wilderness, because that is where we live. He is out there, hungry and hurting, because the world is hungry and hurting. Jesus goes into the wilderness, and he fasts; he leaves behind everything else that one needs even for bare existence, to find God, to belong to God to the exclusion of everything else that makes up human life. This is his proclamation that one thing only is necessary, to find God.

Over the centuries, many Christians wanted to withdraw to the wilderness, be that physically or symbolically, to stand where Jesus has stood, alone before God, in detachment from selfish concerns. In the first centuries, the desert fathers and mothers who withdrew to the deserts of Syria, Palestine and above all Egypt, had a lifestyle of great simplicity, with fasting, solitude, silence, vigil, prayer and poverty – one can 'hear' its echo in the Lenten practices that many church traditions still encourage, a tradition that reached Europe through monasticism, life in monastic communities, who have wanted to share a life of prayer, meditation and work. The desert fathers and mothers showed by simple but practical living that the Gospel is both true and real, and it is open for all who in sincerity want it.

Few among us would go so far today as to practise a monastic type of Lenten discipline. Nevertheless, there is much for us in today's Gospel reading to take on our Lent journey and beyond, whether we give this well-known temptation story a literal or a spiritual sense.

We don't always – if at all – choose to enter wilderness, to experience challenges, loss, pain, a time of trial. But wilderness happens, in the guise of a difficult relationship, a hospital waiting room, a panic attack, a sudden loss … A place of uncertainty, of bewilderment and disorientation that strips us bare, both before God and evil. This brings us face to face with the temptations in our own life, with competing stories about who we are, what the meaning of our life is, and where we are going.

Jesus engages in a verbal sparring match with the devil, in the wilderness. When the devil offers a story of self-indulgence (make yourself bread from stones!), of self-aggrandisement (all the nations of the world will belong to you if you worship me!), and of self-serving religious identity (if you are God's beloved, cast yourself from the top of the temple!), Jesus offers the story of God being his source of life and identity. He chooses the path of trust in God over the security of meeting the world's expectations. Jesus affirms the primacy of God and of God's purposes for himself and for the world. It is here, in the wilderness, confronted with temptation, that he prepares to announce good news to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, the year of the Lord's favour.

Like many others, I so often give in to the temptation to define my own existence, to accumulate 'stuff' as a reflection of my identity, but it is in the wilderness that we are reminded that God is the origin of all that we are. We need to get to this place, so that we learn this lesson, but I can see, in my own life, how much I would like to avoid it.

We have to learn how to let the Spirit lead us out of that place within ourselves where hungers, dreams and fears try to shut out the voice of God – to allow ourselves to be led to an uncomfortable and challenging place with God, where we should kneel before the hopes and hurts of a broken world, where we should seek to bring healing and to bear witness to God's promises.

I'm someone who can't wait to get beyond the literal sense of Scripture, yet, these days, I cannot prevent myself from thinking about the long journey in the wilderness that has begun for millions of Ukrainian people who have had to flee their homes, confronted as they are with the terrors and losses of war. What will be the Lenten journey of other millions, across the border, who trust the one who proclaims that authority over kingdoms of the world and their earthly glory have been given to him, and who promises to share them with those who worship him?

We cannot escape the wilderness this year – we will stay there longer than we imagined a few weeks ago. Our greatest vulnerabilities and needs will be laid bare before God. We will look evil in the face, we will hear his voice.

Let Lent, then, be a time when we walk humbly and closer with God, when we put our trust in him, and when we direct our lives to doing his will in the world. And may we hear God whisper: 'Behold, I am doing a new thing, […] I am making a way in the wilderness.' (Isaiah 43.19)

May God grant us the grace always to choose to be his, in the wilderness of our world and wherever our journey takes us.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Second Sunday of Lent

13th March 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

It's hard to believe it is only three weeks since I preached in Marseille about faith, noting that just as our societies were beginning to emerge from the pandemic, the threat of war seemed to be looming on the doorstep of Europe. In searching for a definition of faith that day, I quoted some words written by a clergy friend of mine on being diagnosed in his thirties with an incurable illness. He had written: 'Right down deep in the middle of all that is weak and vulnerable and fragile is something absolutely permanent and constant, and which speaks of hope and glory.' Four days after I quoted those words, the tanks rolled into Ukraine.

In that sermon I noted that faith means two things: belief and trust; that the first is about head, the other about heart; that the opposite of belief is doubt and the opposite of trust, fear. Well, there's a lot of fear around now. And when my atheist friends ask (as they often do) why I bother reading texts written millennia ago at a time like this, rather than sitting anxiously in front of a TV screen (which I also do), I would want to reply that this morning's readings speak well into these times. For all three are about trust, trust against the odds.

Abraham is frequently held up as a model for faith. The first of the patriarchs, revered by the three great monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Abraham sets out from his home at God's prompting, aged 75, with no security, no fallback, willing to trust God's promises that 'in him all the families of the earth shall be blessed'. Our reading from Genesis today comes later, when Abraham is still waiting for the fulfilment of the promise, and he tells God that the wait has become too long. Specifically, he points out that what has been promised will only come about if he has an heir.

We see in these chapters of Genesis a pattern of promise, challenge, and promise again. We will hear a similar pattern in the conversation between Mary and the Archangel when we celebrate the Annunciation in two weeks' time. The human response to extraordinary news, extraordinary calling. But this time too there is revelation. God takes Abraham and says: 'Look towards the heaven and count the stars… So shall your descendants be.' There's no record of Abraham's reply. No 'Be it unto me'. But we are told that 'he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness'. His response to his calling was trust.

Fast forward two thousand years, and in his letters to the young churches of Rome and Galatia the apostle Paul quotes this sentence with approval: the fact that Abraham trusted God and 'it was reckoned to him as righteousness'. Fast forward again fifteen hundred years, and the same sentence became one of the foundation stones for the Reformation when the young Martin Luther found in it the assurance that having faith in God was enough for salvation. An over-conscientious monk, racked by guilt at the sins he might have committed, Luther was increasingly unhappy in a medieval church environment that kept the keys to forgiveness locked tight unless a sum of money was paid. So our Old Testament reading today turns out to be foundational, in more ways than one.

What of our Epistle, the reading from Paul's Letter to the Philippians? It, too, is about unfufilled promise. Paul writes that, for those who set their minds on earthly things, 'their god is the belly' – they are not looking higher than their navels. But he explains that the Christian faith works differently: 'our citizenship is in heaven'. Christ 'will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory'. Christ takes into himself all our shortcomings and sufferings and transforms them, giving our scarcity back to us as abundance. It is what happens at the Eucharist: we bring our bread and our wine, and we are given them back as the body and blood of Christ. The modesty of our offerings is given back in the superabundance of the food that lives for ever. That is how Christianity operates in human experience. We put in all our suffering, frustration, tears and helplessness, and we receive back God's promise to be with us for ever, never to let us go. It doesn't make the waiting any less painful, and tragically in the weeks and months ahead of humanitarian and political crisis in Europe there will be much suffering, frustration, tears and

helplessness. But the Christian experience of transformation teaches us to trust. Like Abraham. Like Jesus himself.

Which brings us to our Gospel. It, too, is about trust, though in a different way. The passage includes Jesus's 'Lament for Jerusalem', pointing to how difficult life becomes when trust breaks down. It's a reminder of how difficult it is to trust, and of how the whole of the Scriptures are really about trust, a gift to us to encourage and restore us in trusting God even in the face of great adversity. The American author and civil rights leader Howard Thurman wrote that the Bible was written for those with their backs to the wall. Most of the people it is about are in a minority context – living through exile and persecution, social and ethnic outsiders – all through the Gospels right up to the Book of Revelation where the writer is surrounded by the force of the Roman Empire and it seems as though the fledgling church has come to nothing. That is the context of the Bible. For the last two weeks we have been reminded that it is our context too. Abraham and his wife are two people surviving against the odds. Jesus of Nazareth knows that the next time he goes to Jerusalem it will be to his death. From the cross he will quote the opening words of Psalm 22: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Yet perhaps internally he was also reciting the rest of the Psalm, which goes on: 'Our forebears trusted in you … they put their trust in you and were not confounded.' Trusting God, against the odds.

The scene in our Gospel reading is filled with gathering menace. But the words in verse 32 point to something else: 'On the third day I finish my work'. The third day. The day that changed everything. The day towards which the preparation of these weeks of Lent is pointing. The day on which all human suffering,

frustration, tears and helplessness are gathered up and transformed for ever. Easter Day.

Yes, these texts were written a long time ago. No, they don't have nothing to say to us now. For faith, hope and love sustain us, against the odds. Let us live in the light of that knowledge, that trust, today and always. The trust that 'right down deep in the middle of all that is weak and vulnerable and fragile is something absolutely permanent and constant, and which speaks of hope and glory.'

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Fourth Sunday of Lent

27th March 2022

All Saints' Marseille – Aix-en-Provence

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

Rembrandt, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg

According to Charles Dickens, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is the "shortest short story ever told". Our Christian identity has been, undoubtedly, shaped by this Gospel passage.

Many of us feel irresistibly drawn to this story of homecoming, I guess, because we can identify, more or less consciously, with one of the characters: the wayward son, who wasted the parental bounty or the righteous son who stays at home, or the father whose love could not be contained. It is a rich story suffused with hope and love.

Throughout his life, the 17th century Dutch painter Rembrandt etched, drew, or painted several scenes from this parable: the departure of the younger son, the high living, the herding of pigs, and especially, on many occasions, the final episode, the return. His "final word" is the monumental *Return of the Prodigal Son* that has been, for more than 250 years, part of the Hermitage collection of art in Saint Petersburg.

Two figures emerge from absolute darkness and capture the viewer's attention: an elderly man in a great red cloak touches with gentleness the shoulders of a dishevelled boy who

kneels before him. We cannot but be drawn into the painting through the intimacy between these two figures, and the serene, mysterious light enveloping them. When, at the age of about sixty, Rembrandt started to work on this painting, the parable had become a recapitulation of his own life. He was a man worn down by the consequences of the extravagant life he had led as a successful young artist, by his resentments and bitterness. The children he had hoped would bring him joy and comfort in his old age - they were no more. Under his paintbrush, the drama of his life is transfigured into a mysterious event of forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing.

Nearly 40 years ago, the Dutch Catholic priest, theologian and spiritual writer Henri Nouwen had a chance encounter with a reproduction of Rembrandt's painting, that set him out on a long spiritual journey. He even travelled to the Soviet Union in 1986 and sat for days in the Hermitage Museum to drink in the painting – "the painting above all paintings", as some have called it, a painting that unites humility and magnificence. Over a period of several years, he returned again and again to Rembrandt's work to understand how it illuminated his life.

"I came to see the painting", Nouwen said, "as the one that contained not only the heart of the story that God wants to tell me, but also the heart of the story that I want to tell to God and to God's people. All of the Gospel is there. All of my life is there."

At first, Nouwen said, he was drawn to the image of the son kneeling at his father's feet. His shaven head and torn tunic speak of the depths of the young man's despair. His long and humiliating journey, after his reversal of fortune, is told by the soles of his feet. He has left home and family to pursue happiness, yet he was broken by many calamities: dissolute living squandered his resources - or rather "his substance" as a literal translation will have it; severe famine, and social neglect ("no one gave him anything") morphed him into a non-person.

Yet, in this experience of utter emptiness, by grace, he was still able to say the word with which his entire misadventure began: "Father".

The gentle weight of his father's hands on the young man's frail shoulders gives him assurance that there is still a place where he belongs. Nouwen perceived in this image a truth that he claimed as his own: whatever he might lose in his life, he was still his Father's child. His coming home meant to walk toward the Father who awaited him with open arms and wanted to tell him that he was accepted and loved for ever.

At another point in his journey, Nouwen was taken by the image of the dutiful brother. Like Nouwen, most of us probably think of ourselves as being like the older son who stayed home, keeping the commandments, doing the right thing, obeying the rules, walking in the narrow way. Therefore, when we read or tell this parable, we tend to focus on the forgiveness and the lavish welcome offered to the younger son and brush off the story of the "loss" of his elder brother, who heaps reproaches upon his father. Through disdain for

his sibling and his self-righteousness, he has left his father's house and is a foreigner dwelling in the far country of contempt. We can ask ourselves, as Nouwen did, how often has our inclination to make judgements in the name of our righteousness, kept us from exercising compassion and forgiveness?

Many viewers see the older brother in the stern looking figure on the right side of the painting, stiff in his resentfulness, engulfed in darkness because of his inner complaint and his refusal to share in his father's joy, that cannot be complete until this older son finds his way home as well. Neither brother sees himself as he truly is: the father's beloved child, belonging, with his sibling, to one family. They both need to be freed from false riches, so as to understand the true riches of the father: those of his unconditional love. Each of them, each of us, has their unique place in the Father's house, one that the Father himself prepared for them.

Later in his life, Nouwen came to see that he was called to become like the father in his extravagant compassion, forgiveness and welcome for each and every one who is lost. The father's unreserved, unlimited love is offered wholly and equally to both his sons. He gives each of them the freedom to be themselves, to undertake the journey they want. But he also knows they need his love, and they need a 'home'. As the poet T. S. Eliot has put it, "the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time" *The Four Quartets*). To arrive at the father's house means learning that this is a place where love is the only thing that matters.

Standing at the centre of this place is God who says to us: "Child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Passion Sunday

3rd April 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

25 years ago this summer a young woman was involved in an accident while on holiday in Paris. The following morning a stunned world awoke to the news that Diana, Princess of Wales had died. The public outpouring of grief that followed was immense. Huge numbers of mourners travelled to leave flowers at the gates of the royal palaces. At the time, I was working near the Tube station closest to Buckingham Palace. Outside the station people set up stalls selling flowers, and for several days and nights the air was thick with their scent. A few commentators began to say that the quantity of flowers being bought was inappropriate and that the money would have been better given to the charitable causes with which the Princess was associated. But they were missing the point. I came home one night to find a message on my answerphone from a Christian woman I knew well. The message said simply: 'I've got it: it's the oil of spikenard.'

The scene is our Gospel reading today is as potent as it is brief. Today is Passion Sunday, the day our Lenten focus begins to contemplate Jesus's journey towards Jerusalem, and to the suffering and death it will bring. In our imagination we travel with the disciples, who are at last beginning to realise the significance of what is about to happen. It is apt, therefore, that the Lectionary today gives us the story of the anointing of Jesus.

Both the Gospels of Matthew and Mark include the story of an unnamed woman who anoints Jesus's head with costly nard. There are similarities in the different versions of the story. In Matthew and Mark the anointing is shown as an act of devotion; some who are present tell the woman off for wasting money; and Jesus defends her, associating her action with preparing him for his death. In Luke there's a slightly different emphasis. The woman is referred to as a 'sinner', and the scene takes place in the house of Simon the Pharisee. The woman in Luke wets Jesus's feet with her tears, dries them with her hair and anoints them with perfume. The point of this version is the repentance of the anointer: Jesus forgives her sin because of her act of love.

The Fourth Gospel appears to combine the two traditions. As in Matthew and Mark, the setting is Bethany, but here the unnamed woman is identified with Mary of Bethany, and the story is located in the home she shares with her sister Martha and their brother Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised in the previous chapter. The reported cost of the perfume is the same as in Mark's Gospel – three hundred denarii, the equivalent of a year's working wage. The anonymous 'some' who protest at the waste of money in Matthew and Mark are in John's account identified instead with Judas. John is deliberately creating a contrast between the thinking of two disciples of Jesus – Mary and Judas.

Mary's act is filled with meaning. First, it's an act of humility, foreshadowing Jesus's washing of the disciples' feet in the following chapter – the word used for 'wiping' the feet is the same in both stories. Secondly, it's an act of gentleness. John draws attention to the comfort it must have brought Jesus – the smell of the perfume, the touch of her hair, the attention given to his feet as they prepare to walk the way of the Cross. Someone is finally accepting and honouring what he is about to do, after all the misunderstanding shown by

Jesus's other followers. The storm clouds are gathering. Tomorrow he will enter Jerusalem, in the events we will recall on Palm Sunday.

Another point about Mary's gesture is that it is transgressive. For a woman to touch a man's feet in public, let alone wipe them with her hair, would have been seen as shocking, even more so than now. It was provocative, and it provoked Judas to criticise her, though in terms of the wastefulness of the gesture rather than the inappropriateness of the contact. One can see where Judas was coming from: to smear the equivalent of €20,000 on someone's feet was a reckless thing to do. But to criticise it on those grounds was missing the point.

The point about it is its very extravagance. It represents an overflowing of love and generosity, like the act of God in creation, like the gift of Christ to us. The Gospel writer is encouraging us to see that there are broadly two ways to live – Judas's way and Mary's way. I wonder which we usually choose. Judas's way is shown as calculating, mean-spirited, about hoarding. Mary's way is shown as generous, beautiful, about outpouring. It is clear which way Jesus endorses. This, he suggests, is a true representation of me. This gesture is an icon of my incarnation and my passion.

So Mary's gesture offers a clue to how we might live our lives in the Kingdom of God - the Kingdom where anxiousness about scarcity gives way to a sense of God's abundance, and where service to one another is what we are called upon to give.

There is another anointing in this Gospel, in Chapter 19. After Jesus's crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two secret but well connected disciples of Jesus, ask Pilate for permission to take away his body. They bring a mixture of myrrh and aloes, 'weighing about a hundred pounds'. Again, it is an extravagant quantity. It's almost the only other time we see anyone doing something kind

and generous to Jesus in the Passion narrative, caring for his body. What does that say to us? Are we prepared to be extravagant for him? Extravagant in our gratitude for what he has done for us? We know from our emotional lives that they are richer and more fulfilling when we give space to gratitude. The same is true for our spiritual lives. Gratitude to God is free, an act of love, and all our love to God is in response to God's love for us.

Let's come back to the exchange between Jesus and Judas. Jesus's response to Judas's criticism (why wasn't the money given to the poor?) calls for an integration of mind and heart. In following Christ we are not given a choice between devotion to God and committed social action. We can, and should, do both. As the Gospel says, we 'always have the poor with [us]' and we must never forget their needs or cease to be outraged by the injustices of the world. Loving our neighbours as ourselves is what we are called to do, every day of our lives. But we are also called to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. This scene reminds us of the summary of the law which Jesus himself gave us, and that in following it we are liberated from our focus on self, scarcity and suspicion.

So it's a potent one, this brief scene, designed to make us reflect. How often do we say, like Judas, that 'the money could have been better spent'? Yet, in Mary's case, might we not conclude that spending money on a gesture that is still being talked about two thousand years later, a gesture so beautifully reflecting both the action of God in creation and the action of Christ in pouring out his life for us, was actually money well spent? Perhaps that's what the message on my answerphone meant, 25 years ago.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon

Second Sunday of Easter

24th April 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Our Gospel reading this morning begins in an unpromising place, with a group of frightened men in hiding. In the early morning Mary Magdalene has told them the news of the resurrection, but in the evening they are still in hiding, for their fear is real. They have seen the extreme violence of Jesus's crucifixion, a death reserved for those who claimed allegiance to anyone other than the Roman Emperor. And they are aware that, as his closest followers, they are on the wanted list. Psychologically, too, they are in hiding, coming to terms with the knowledge that the previous week their fear had got the better of them and they had all abandoned Jesus.

Yet the fear and the locked doors are no barrier to the risen Christ. The first thing he offers them is peace to their troubled hearts. The familiar everyday greeting, *Shalom*. The resurrection accounts are full of rehabilitation. In the scene just before this one, Mary Magdalene passes on to the disciples Christ's words to her: 'Do not hold on to me, but go to my brothers.' The one whom they had betrayed begins by calling them brothers. There is forgiveness there, reinforced when they themselves encounter the risen Christ. Peter, who denied

him three times on the night before his death, will be restored by the threefold sending: 'Feed my lambs.' 'Tend my sheep.' 'Feed my sheep.'

The assurance of peace is repeated by the risen Christ: 'Peace be with you.' But this time it is accompanied by words likely to cause them more anxiety: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' The disciples know where that sending has led Jesus – to the cross. Is that where he is sending them too? The problem with peace-making of the kind Jesus had taught them was that it was controversial. It was the sort of peace-making that gives rise to outcasts being included, the marginalised being given a place at the table, a reversal of the conventions of the last being last and the poor staying poor. Nothing less than a new way of being, the vision of a Kingdom of God where old structures are broken down and society transformed.

It was this kind of peace-making, the work of reconciliation and radical inclusion, that got Jesus into trouble. And it is no less of a threat today when it comes up against self-interest. Those who work for the inclusion of the rejected, for justice for the marginalised and oppressed, must be prepared at least to be unpopular. And yet the hope of Easter infuses everything. It enables us to say of any set of human circumstances: 'It doesn't have to be like this.' Human violence, envy, greed, exploitation, may all be confronted. For Easter confirms the promise that God's kingdom is breaking in. You only have to look at what Christians have done through the centuries in facing down evil to see it in action.

The scene in our Gospel reading leads us next to Thomas, the apostle often referred to as 'doubting Thomas'. Thomas was actually a realist, braver than many of his friends. We notice that he was not with them behind the locked

doors on that first evening after the resurrection. Apparently he had been brave enough to venture out. Weeks earlier, when Jesus was called to the home of Martha and Mary when their brother Lazarus had died, which would mean going back into Judea at a time when his life was already in danger there, it was Thomas who pointed out the risk that all the disciples would run in going with Jesus. Yet it was Thomas, too, who decided to take it: 'Let us also go, that we may die with him'. (John 11.16.) And when Jesus, preparing to face his own death, said to his followers that they knew where he is going and they therefore knew the way, it was Thomas who voiced the question for all of them: 'Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' (John 14.5.)

Thomas is the kind of critical friend we all need. His questioning teaches us the value of doubt, which is always the counterpart to faith. For it is Thomas who, in daring to question the truth of the resurrection as it was told to him by the others, is rewarded by a faith stronger than theirs. He says he will insist on sight and touch as a means of belief, and Christ offers him both. Yet when the offer comes, the mere sight of Christ's wounds is enough for him, and Thomas utters the words: 'My Lord and my God' – the very oath of allegiance which subjects of the Roman Empire were required to swear to the emperor. Thomas, instead, says them to the risen Christ, thereby placing his own life in danger. Two thousand years on, the words ask of us the question: where do we stand?

We notice how the wounds matter to Thomas. 'Unless I see the mark of the nails … I will not believe.' Thomas, the realist, wants to see that the wounds are still visible on the risen Christ. The wounds matter to him, and to us, because the resurrection does not promise an escape from evil and suffering, but the assurance of a power that transforms them. God can take pain and heal and

redeem it. And that assurance is coupled with a pledge that, whatever our suffering and our pain, God is with us in it.

Pope Francis once said: 'I prefer a Church that is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out in the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security'. Those words, too, ask of us the question: where do we stand?

Fortunately, we do not stand alone. Even as Christ sends the disciples out, he breathes on them and says: 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' It is this which empowers that small frightened group of followers, hiding behind locked doors, to go out and change the world. And so Pentecost - the gift of the Holy Spirit - comes early in the Fourth Gospel. And it comes with a beautiful echo. The word used for 'breathe' is the same as the one used in the Book of Genesis when God breathes life into Adam. The resurrection takes place in a garden, where humanity's experience of paradise was lost. Now, the Gospel writer implies, the whole creation is being renewed, complete with a new breath of life from God. Telling of this is the writer's whole purpose: 'These [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and through believing you may have life in his name.'

So in these weeks of Easter, let us accept Christ's invitation to carry his peace out into the world, whatever the cost. And, in doing it, let us pray that we may have life, life in all its fullness, in his name.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 4th Sunday of Easter

8th May 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Today, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is known as Good Shepherd Sunday, when each year the readings set are based around the theme of Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

Our Gospel reading today, coming a few verses after Jesus has spoken the words 'I am the good shepherd', is part of a section that begins with Jesus healing a blind man on the Sabbath. This triggered an argument among the religious authorities over whether Jesus was 'from God' or whether he was possessed by a demon. Some of the Pharisees thought he could not possibly be from God because he had broken the Sabbath. Others thought that the miracle itself showed that Jesus was 'from God'.

Jesus enters into discussion with them and uses an extended figure of speech about shepherds and sheep. He refers to himself both as the good shepherd and as the gate of the sheepfold, pointing out that those who enter a sheepfold by climbing in another way are thieves and bandits. The Gospel notes that, again, the Pharisees 'were divided' because of these words – some of them no doubt spotted who the thieves and bandits were.

All this is going on during the festival of the Dedication, also known as Hanukkah. The festival commemorates the rededication of the temple in Jerusalem, in the second century before Christ, after it had been desecrated by the Greeks, who had set up a pagan altar inside it and made a sacrifice to Zeus upon it. This sparked off a successful rebellion by the Maccabees, which freed Jerusalem from Greek rule and enabled the temple and its altar to be rededicated. And so, within the context of the festival celebrating the rededication, the question by the religious authorities to Jesus has strong political overtones. They ask him to tell them 'plainly' if he is the Messiah, the Christ. Is he the one who will liberate the Jewish nation, two hundred years after the Maccabees, but this time from Roman imperial rule?

But Jesus seems to ignore the political overtones of their question, drawing their attention instead to the works he has performed - the signs he has shown them in which power was subordinate to love – as all the evidence they need. This is what he effectively replies to their question: 'Look at my life. Look at my actions. What I do tells you who I am.' But they cannot hear the evidence, for they are not of his 'sheep'. To them he is a stranger. His own sheep, on the other hand, hear his voice, that of their good shepherd.

Why all this talk of sheep and shepherds? Not just because first century Palestine was an agrarian economy. There are also echoes there of the shepherd boy who became a king, the greatest king Israel had ever known – King David. But Jesus goes further. He refers to having passed on to his followers all that the Father has given him, and that 'the Father and I are one' - working together in complete harmony. For his followers, it means he can also say this: 'I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.' That is the Easter message.

This is too much for the authorities. They hear in the words 'the Father and I are one' that Jesus is making himself God, not just in the sense of being united in purpose and agency with the Father. And so they try to stone him for blasphemy. To which Jesus replies by saying to them again: if you don't believe what I say, believe the works that I do. 'Look at my life. Look at my actions. What I do tells you who I am.'

Today is also Vocations Sunday, when the church invites people to pray for more vocations to ordination and encourages those who may be considering it to explore a call to ministry. But there's a much wider meaning to vocation than the call to ministry, for every single person has a vocation. It's why we talk of 'vocational guidance' in schools. For many, their vocation – literally, their calling - is what they do from day to day: being a spouse, a partner, a parent, a person doing a particular job. Sometimes the calling we have is something we have not yet found time to follow. Sometimes there are moments of revelation that change us, when we become aware of our true calling, the thing we are really here to do.

And so it's appropriate that our first reading today is the story of Dorcas. Dorcas is remembered, not for her mighty acts of power, but for the clothes she made. When people wear them, they think of her. On the face of it a simple, practical vocation, but one for which she is deeply loved. When Peter arrives, her friends show him the clothes as they weep for her loss.

Dorcas will also be remembered as part of the resurrection story. For the last few weeks we have focused on the appearances of Jesus to his friends after his rising. Now it is Peter who shows the healing power of God at work. Peter, commissioned by Jesus at the breakfast on the beach ('Feed my sheep'),

honouring the calling of those he encounters as the gospel spreads out from Jerusalem across the known world.

The story of Dorcas is a reminder that life is about call and response, for each one of us. The response of Mary to the call she heard ('Be it unto me'). The response of Jesus to the call he discerned, echoing words of Isaiah as he read from the scroll in the synagogue at Nazareth: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.'

The questions Vocations Sunday asks of all of us are:

> Is what I am spending my energies on every day my real vocation?
> Is this what God wants me to be doing with my life?
> How is what I am doing giving witness to my faith?
> What contribution am I offering to making the world a better place for others?
> To what extent am I a spreader of love, of truth, of justice, of freedom, of tolerance and acceptance?
> And even if I am in a position which it would be difficult to change at the moment, how, within it, is God calling me to greater service?
> How much do I give in my life and how much do I take?

Call and response. In the same chapter of John, Chapter 10, Jesus speaks the words which sum up the reason why churches exist, why people have turned their lives upside down for this Gospel and, please God, will continue to do so for centuries to come. For he said: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' Life in all its fullness, whatever our many callings, each one of them

unique. I wonder what yours will be. On this Vocations Sunday, let us keep in mind Jesus's response to those who asked him who he was: 'Look at my life. Look at my actions. What I do tells you who I am.'

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Ascension Day

26th May 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

The Ascension of Christ takes us into the language of mysticism, a strand of spirituality common to most religious practice, often echoed in art and music. We are in the territory of metaphor, as the Gospel writers sought to make sense of the deepest truths they had discerned about Jesus, expressing them in a way that spoke most powerfully to their first hearers.

Luke's hearers had consistently heard Jesus portrayed as a prophet, one who had both followed and exceeded the examples of the greatest prophets of the tradition, Moses and Elijah. The parallels with Moses and Elijah are made explicit in the story of the Transfiguration, immediately before Jesus goes up to Jerusalem to face his 'exodus' of suffering, death and resurrection. At the end of Luke's Gospel, these events are completed by his being carried up to heaven. For Luke's hearers, there would have been unmistakable parallels again. Moses entered the cloud to be with God. Elijah was taken up in a whirlwind at the end of his earthly ministry (2 Kings 2.1-18), promising to his disciple and successor Elisha that Elisha would receive a measure of his spirit. Jesus promises his disciples his Spirit as he takes his leave of them: his power and presence will

continue on earth when the Spirit comes to empower them to take up his mission.

Those are some of the echoes of the Ascension story which Luke's first hearers would have heard. What are we to make of it, twenty-one centuries later?

Perhaps we may discover in our time the same truths about the human condition which the first disciples also learned. They had to get used to living in a world without Jesus, or at least without the Jesus they had known. In his final weeks, particularly in St John's account, Jesus urges his followers to understand: 'Things are going to be different. You won't see me or hear me in the way you used to. You will experience my presence in a new way.' And in John's Gospel Jesus actually tells them that it is better for them if he goes away. Luke's account tells us it was as he withdrew from them that they are blessed.

In one of her sermons, the American priest Barbara Brown Taylor writes of how her husband, Edward, is a lover of birds, particularly hawks. When they travel together he tends to spot large birds flying high above the road and becomes more interested in working out the species of bird than in what is going on at ground level. Barbara admits that her nerves are often somewhat frayed by the end of such a journey. A few years ago, she and her husband had to be apart for a couple of months and she thought she might get a break from the hawks. Instead, she found she was seeing them everywhere, almost as if for the first time. She began to realise that she wasn't so much seeing them with her own eyes but with her husband's. He wasn't there, so she was seeing them for him. Although he was absent, he felt as present as ever.

There is something of that process going on in the Acts of the Apostles, the second part of Luke's account of the life of Jesus and the transformative effect he had on people. As Jesus takes his leave of his disciples, he tells them: 'You are now my witnesses, my messengers'. Two men then appear and give them a small kick: 'What are you standing around for? You heard what he said. There is work to be done.'

The priest and author Mark Oakley writes of Jesus's parting message to his disciples in these terms: 'Go and see the world through my eyes, love the world with my compassion, stand up for the forgotten with my courage, challenge evil with my anger, make this world through my justice. I'm not going anywhere, … I'm going *everywhere* – with you, all the way, in you to your deepest self. There will be times when you won't see me, but it's because I must now become the air you breathe, the light you see by. … It's scary. But as he challenges us to live alone he promises to send some comfort – Spirit, holy, beautiful, just and freeing.' And not just now, but for ever.

The ascended Christ becomes the source of our life, our energy and our trust. The wind beneath our wings. The thing that gets us out of bed in the morning and makes us attempt the impossible, sometimes even achieving it. The love that lies at the heart of all things, believing all things, enduring all things, the only strength, the only meaning.

That's the process that begins at the Ascension - at least from our end, as his followers. Do we ever wonder what it was like for Jesus? The late poet laureate Cecil Day-Lewis wrote a poem about what it felt like leaving his five year old son at school to play his first game of football. It's called *Walking Away*:

'… I can see
You walking away from me towards the school
With the pathos of a half-fledged thing set free
Into a wilderness, the gait of one
Who finds no path where the path should be.

That hesitant figure, eddying away
Like a winged seed loosened from its parent stem,
Has something I never quite grasp to convey
About nature's give-and-take – the small, the scorching
Ordeals which fire one's irresolute clay.

I have had worse partings, but none that so
Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly
Saying what God alone could perfectly show –
How selfhood begins with a walking away,
And love is proved in the letting go.'

'While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.'

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 7th Sunday of Easter

29th May 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Year C: Acts 16.16-34; Revelation 22.12-14, 16-17, 20-end; John 17.20-end

It's an interesting mix of readings for this Sunday after Ascension Day. Let's start with the Gospel. It takes place on Maundy Thursday - the final section of the prayer of Jesus to the Father at the end of the Last Supper. Immediately after speaking these words, Jesus and his followers go to the Garden of Gethsemane where he will be arrested, then tried, tortured and crucified. Once we know this, we understand better the urgency of the prayer – these are almost the last words Jesus will say to his disciples. His last will and testament to them.

It's a prayer from the heart, in the shadow of the cross. Jesus prays for the unity of his followers that will mirror the unity of the Trinity. It's a mystical passage, where Christians are encouraged to share in the very nature of God – a nature of deep interdependence, in which love continually flows between the members of the Trinity. A unity in diversity, rooted in love. Jesus prays that the glory of this loving unity will draw into itself not only his disciples but also all those who will become believers because of their witness, so that they will all be one with the Father and the Son. We are included in this prayer, for we have come to believe because of the witness of those first disciples. It is good for us to listen to this prayer, as we hear Jesus pray for each one of us and for the Church to

which we belong. That might make us feel uncomfortable when we stop to think of the way we talk about each other sometimes, or of the way we respond when difficult issues arise in the Church. We do well to ask ourselves: 'What are we doing to enable this prayer of Jesus to become the reality of our life together?'

We hear this reading today in the light of Christ's 'mighty resurrection and glorious ascension', as we await the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. We celebrate the victory of love over hate, light over darkness, goodness over evil. But we remember too that this prayer was said on Maundy Thursday, when betrayal, injustice, violence and agony were imminent. If we are called to be one in the glory of the loving unity of God, then we are also called to be one in the darkness and pain of this world as experienced by the Son.

The conflict in Ukraine has reminded us that peace in the world is a fragile gift. In that knowledge, what is the Christian witness to which we are called? There will always be differences within and between peoples, and within and between churches. But our calling is to transcend them, to deal with them in ways that seek understanding, costly reconciliation and mutual love. Jesus prays that we will be at one with the God who is the source of our being, for it is through our manifestation of God's love and unity that others will come to believe in his message of love. When we are divided and hostile, we cannot be surprised if the world rejects us and the God we claim to believe in. But when we show love and healing, when we welcome all who turn to us, then people will come to know a God of love whose purpose is to draw everyone into the loving unity of God's own being.

That might sound like complicated theology. But the Acts of the Apostles is good at showing complex ideas in concrete examples. Take the example of Paul and Silas in our reading from Acts today. Having been jailed at Philippi through a

piece of lazy and incompetent law enforcement, they find that in their weakness and helplessness the power of God is suddenly displayed. Unexpectedly freed to leave their prison cell, they wait instead by the open door. What draws their jailer to faith is not the extreme act of the earthquake or the breaking of the chains. It is the integrity of Paul and Silas who, rather than flee, choose to wait for justice to be done, thereby saving the jailer himself, who was about to take his own life rather than face execution. Through Paul and Silas, the jailer discerns a God who channels all his power into love. The glory of God is revealed in the prison cell, not in broken chains but in newly forged bonds of love. Wouldn't it be wonderful if people began to notice Christians because of their integrity, not their bickering? The way they care for the dispossessed, the lonely and the frightened, the way they dignify outsiders, the way they take responsibility for those in need.

In his commentary on John's Gospel, William Temple (who was Archbishop of Canterbury during the Second World War) describes the glory of God that Jesus is referring to as 'absolute love in perfect self-expression'. He writes: 'In the face of the selfishness of the world, [that self-expression of love] is the Cross, but when the divine love has by its self-sacrifice won its response, it is the perfect happiness of love given and returned. This, of which the Cross is one aspect and the New Jerusalem is the other aspect, is what the Father eternally bestows upon the Son, and the Son historically bestows upon His disciples. … That fellowship of love is the end for which we were created and for which our nature as God fashioned it is designed.'

Going back to the scene in Acts, the storage vessels in the jail provide water for the jailer to clean the wounds of his prisoners. The same vessels provide water to baptise the jailer's family. In our reading from the Book of Revelation, we are

told that the gift of the water of life is available to whoever desires it. We can taste the clarity and radiance of heaven in the here and now, as a gift of God. It doesn't require an earthquake for you or me to introduce someone to Christ. It's simpler than that. 'By their fruits you will know them', said Jesus. By their love.

Next week there will be disruption – the arrival of the Holy Spirit, like a hurricane blowing through the Church will all its petty divisions. Empowering the followers of Christ to set aside all that divides them and go out and do his work. In Luke's account of the conclusion of the time that followed the resurrection, the risen Jesus takes leave of his disciples and blesses them, and he tells them: 'You are now my witnesses, my messengers'. Given our propensity to sit around ruminating over the things that divide us, it is good to be reminded that the next thing that happened was that two men in white robes appeared and gave the disciples a gentle kick: 'What are you standing around for? You heard what he said. There is work to be done.'

'By their fruits you will know them', said Jesus. By their love.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 4th Sunday after Trinity

10th July 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

A friend of mine once suggested that the parable of the Good Samaritan was an easy one to preach about. In one sense, of course, they were right. It's one of the 'feelgood' passages of the Gospel. There's apparently a clear sense of right and wrong. What is being asked of us doesn't sound too difficult – it's about being kind to people and practical. And it has a happy ending.

For the lawyer asking Jesus the question, it starts out as an easy one too. He seems to know the answer to his own question. 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' - 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself'. Jesus confirms to him: 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

The conversation could have ended there - they have had a polite exchange, and they appear to be agreeing - and in Matthew and Mark's Gospels it does end there. But Luke, with his characteristic focus on how Jesus's message is not only for the nation of Israel but for the benefit of the whole world, goes further. He recounts that the lawyer wanted to 'justify' himself by asking a further question. It's not entirely clear why. Perhaps he wants Jesus to give him greater

affirmation (of the 'I wish all disciples were as clever as you' type). Or perhaps he wants to justify why he has asked a question at all if he already knew the answer. Or it may be a case of genuine doubt. Some of the rabbinic teachings of the time confined 'neighbour' to those who shared the same religious affiliation. Whatever the reason, Luke leads us through this into deeper territory that is suddenly much less easy, less comfortable.

Jesus tells the story of an attack on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Some of you may have visited the Holy Land, in which case you will probably know it. It's a steep road, twisting through barren red rocks, and in the past was notorious for its bandits. As a result of that combination, it is sometimes referred to as the Red Road, or the Road of Blood. A place of violence and danger. To be fair to the priest and to the Levite (who would have ministered in the Temple), they had every reason to pass by on the other side. The body in the ditch might have been a decoy, a trap which would have resulted in them being attacked themselves. The body might have been, or become, a dead body, so that by touching it they would have been prevented from carrying out their religious duties.

But the Samaritan does something different. He is moved with pity and crosses the road. It is hard for us today to get a real sense of the shock that example would have caused to Jesus's hearers. The Samaritans were descended from a population who had occupied the Holy Land after it was conquered by the Assyrians. They had opposed the rebuilding of the Temple and they worshipped differently. So they were social outcasts, ceremonially unclean and religious heretics. They were the hated 'other', the untouchables. Notice how at the end, when Jesus asks the lawyer which of the three was a neighbour to the one who

needed help, the reply comes back ‘The one who showed him mercy’. He cannot even bring himself to utter the word ‘Samaritan’.

I wonder who the Samaritans are for us, in this place and time? Who are the people we find it difficult to name? Whom do we scapegoat, loading onto them our collective sense of unease about ourselves, reassuring ourselves that at least we are not as bad as ‘them’? Try reading the parable substituting the word for that ‘other’ in place of ‘the Samaritan’. How does it sound? This is not ‘easy’ any more. Jesus is taking us into a concept that he has touched on already in his ministry and which was getting him into trouble. For his message is not just ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ but ‘love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you’ (Luke 6.27-28). Suddenly what is being asked of us is way outside our comfort zone.

We are living in complex times. Politically, there is a sense of polarisation which could tip into tension and unrest. In France, the lack of a majority in the National Assembly offers the prospect of five years of political in-fighting. In the United Kingdom, the resignation of the prime minister will open up tensions, new and old. All this in the context of some of the most troubling economic news for over a generation, of war, and of a pandemic that will not go away.

Against this background what, as followers of Christ, are we called to do? Jesus gives us the answer in today's Gospel, an answer that has not changed: we are to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves. Our neighbours may be our enemies, but we are to love them just the same. That doesn’t mean we have to like them. But to treat them as we would ourselves. Our task as Christians is to love the stranger. To stay in the conversation, to hear out the ‘other’, encountering them as a child of God, treating them as another subject and not an object. Not ‘a Samaritan’, ‘a foreigner’, someone who votes differently from

me. This is Christ's message to us, and the world's need for it is greater than ever in times such as these.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus also urges us to action. 'Go and do likewise.' There is a physicality about it. The Samaritan crosses the Road of Blood, bandages his wounds, pours oil and wine in them (Luke, the doctor, cannot help adding this detail). He picks him up, takes him to a place of safety, spends money on him.

Closer to home, what might we do that is practical? Today is Sea Sunday. This church has always had a vocation to look after seafarers. The current version of it is our volunteering with AMAM, the *Association Marseillaise d'Accueil des Marins*. So much of AMAM's work has been on hold because of the pandemic, but now it is starting up again. Seafarers have suffered deeply as a result of the pandemic, often spending months cooped up in small spaces with no certainty of when they might be able to return home. The toll on their mental health has been severe. We owe it to them to renew our practical commitment through AMAM now that it is possible again. Even if we cannot volunteer at the seamen's club, we can do other things like knit hats for them, or prepare parcels of personal items that show in a simple, practical way that someone cares about them.

In the more difficult area of loving the person we feel very different from, if we want to follow Jesus's example, we must start by crossing the road. It will be costly. For radical love is risky. It is not, as my friend's words seemed to suggest, 'easy'. This sort of radical loving is summed up by St Paul in a passage from the Letter to the Romans which we read in Morning Prayer this week:

> ‘Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; … Do not repay anyone evil for evil … If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all… If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink… Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.’

The good news is that we don’t have to do this alone. We do it with Christ, in Christ, and he will be beside us, every step of the way. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 6th Sunday after Trinity

24th July 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

I once heard a story of a young child during the Second World War who announced to his family one evening: 'I prayed that it would snow at Christmas, and it didn't. I prayed that I would be given a puppy, and I wasn't. I prayed that God would keep my father from being killed in the War, and he didn't. I'm not going to pray to God any more.' How do we square that small child's experience with the words of Jesus in today's Gospel reading: 'Ask, and it will be given to you … for everyone who asks receives'?

There is a mystery about prayer. We have probably all known times when we feel that a prayer has been answered, when there is a sense of God's presence in the situation and we feel blessed and full of gratitude. But many of us have probably also known times when the thing longed for didn't happen, when heaven seemed silent and we felt bereft and alone with our need. We may have been left wondering whether it was because we didn't pray hard enough, or well enough. And if we didn't receive what we asked for, are we, like the child in the story, to give up on prayer altogether? I have known more than one devout Christian who, faced with this kind of experience, has done just that. But in the extract from Luke's Gospel we heard this morning, Jesus urges his disciples not

to give up on prayer, but to persist in it. Yet what should we be asking for when we pray? That's a question Jesus's disciples asked him too, as we heard in our reading this morning.

A couple of years ago, the Feast of St Luke (known as 'the beloved physician') fell on a Sunday, and we looked at three different types of prayer we might want to pray for someone we love who is ill. First, we can pray for their recovery. Even if the evidence is that they are unlikely to survive, somehow there is a deep instinct in us to will God to bring life from death. It's a prayer of resurrection. Secondly, we might wish to pray that our loved one will find strength in their suffering, will find courage and patience to last them through the time of distress and a sense that God in Christ will be alongside them. It's a prayer of incarnation.

Finally, there is the third kind of prayer. If we cannot find it in us to ask for a miracle, but we want to pray for more than acceptance, we might pray that if this illness has to be, then let it somehow be not only a time of pain and sorrow but also of grace and gift. May it be a time when the person we care for finds a depth of love, companionship and truth; that as they stare down the approach of death they may have a richer sense of the wonder of living, a thankfulness for all they have seen and known, an ability to bless others as those others face challenges themselves, and a piercing insight into the heart of God. We pray that our loved one may discover their real nature and destiny and see a glimpse of heaven beyond. That's a prayer of transfiguration.

Prayer in the end is about holding before God the people and situations which we carry on our hearts. Someone said to me this week that a lot of what prayer

is doing is trying to get ourselves into a position where we can say 'Thy will be done' and let go of control, to let God be God. There is something about sending out our deepest desire into God's infinite and loving presence, as strongly as we can, knowing that it is the most we can do and that it comes from the depths of our hearts. Knowing too that the outcome is not ours to dictate, but trusting that the response will be loving, albeit in ways we may not fully understand. Which, if we think about it, is the prayer Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.' (Luke 22.42.)

When Jesus's disciples asked him how they should pray, he gave them a few short sentences which offered them an insight and an invitation into his own relationship of intimacy and intensity with God, a relationship characterised by the sort of love that a parent gives to a beloved child. It has been said that the prayer we know as the Lord's Prayer contains in many ways everything humanity needs for its wellbeing. The version given in Luke's Gospel is slightly shorter than the one in Matthew, on which is based the prayer we use in church. But the essence is the same.

The Lord's Prayer contains three direct requests. The first is 'Give us'. 'Give us today our daily bread.' In other words, help us to live in the present tense, not to be so burdened by guilt or scarred by hurt that we live in the past, and let us not be so anxious about the unknown or obsessed with a particular goal that we become prisoners of the future. Give us enough, it says – not so much that we don't know what to do with it or so little that we can't see past our own need. 'Give us' is a prayer to be given the grace to live in the present.

The second request is 'Forgive us'. It is a request to take away the burden of the things we have done and of the things others have done to us. Forgiveness is a complicated thing, but it's vital to our wellbeing and the wellbeing of those around us. Allowing ourselves to be dispossessed of our hatred for someone whom we perceive has done us harm. It doesn't mean that wrong things haven't been done. But it does mean getting to a point where we can say: 'Those wrong things done to me or by me will not always determine the meaning of my life'. To be permanently consumed by hatred or resentment or guilt is to confine ourselves in a world in which the only things that matter are the bad things that have been done to us or by us. And that's a very small world. 'Forgive us' as we forgive is a prayer to be given back the past.

The last request is about the future. 'Deliver us.' Offering God our fear that the future will bring challenges that are too much for us. The request comes in two halves – fear of ourselves, of our own weakness ('Lead us not into temptation') and fear of what lies outside us, of the things we can't control ('Deliver us from evil').

Give us. Forgive us. Deliver us. If we can pray those three things, we will find that we begin to live more abundant lives, not burdened by regret for the past or fear for the future. The prayer says those three things. For the present, give us what we need and the grace to recognise what matters. For the past, forgive us what we can't undo as we forgive what others have done to us. And for the future, don't let us be overwhelmed by something that's too much for us.

One commentator has written: 'The Lord's Prayer says everything we need to say in words and brings us into God's presence as surely as the disciples were

present to the person of Jesus. We can pray with confidence, certain that our prayer is heard.'

I hope the child in the story may have discovered that when he grew up.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 7th Sunday after Trinity

31st July 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Ten days ago, a single EuroMillions ticket holder won the largest amount that has ever been won on a lottery in the United Kingdom: £195 million (or around €200 million). Just think what you could do with that sort of amount.

In my previous life as a lawyer, very occasionally I would come across people within the category the media describe as 'super-rich'. (I should add that most of my clients did not fall within that category and lived quite ordinary lives.) But the encounter made me aware that the sort of fortune which the new lottery winner is learning to live with can bring with it a surprising amount of anxiety. An amount of wealth which for most people would be regarded as solving all of life's practical problems can be experienced as a burden, a source of fear – fear of losing it, fear of not living up to the expectations of the people who had generated the wealth, fear of the people with whom they might form loving relationships because they do not know if they can trust their motives.

Our Gospel reading this morning is part of a series of reflections by Jesus about the problems that arise when we feel over-anxious. It is very much a problem of our time. We live in a society that in all sorts of ways is currently displaying a profound sense of insecurity. Jesus highlights how one of our instinctive responses to this sort of anxiety is to seek security in the things around us,

especially material possessions as a means of safeguarding our future. In the passage that immediately follows the parable of the rich man with the barns, he encourages us instead to note how the birds of the air and the flowers of the field are looked after within the created order, and that we should take our cue from them in order to stress less about our own security. For one problem is that, as humans, we tend to turn means into ends, making our possessions objects of desire in their own right.

The Gospel does not expect us to never to be anxious, but it does offer a contrast between normal worry and undue self-concern. Instead of being anxious about our own security, we are invited to trust the God of love and to live out the values of God. The place where the values of God are fully lived out is what Jesus refers to as the Kingdom of Heaven – living in a dynamic of love which brings, amongst other benefits, freedom from fear. For as the first Letter of John puts it, 'There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear.'

If we look at this morning's parable in more detail, it's noticeable how isolated the man in the story has become. He was already rich before the abundant crops came along. He thinks 'to himself' that he will build bigger barns; there appears to be no one else to have the conversation with. Notice how many times the first person pronoun occurs: 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?"… "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." It's a solitary, self-absorbed conversation. And the irony is that he appears to have no one to eat, drink and be merry with. He has insulated himself from any relationship that might jeopardise his security, and in the process he has

jeopardised the one that matters most – his relationship with God. What is the point of having material security if you have sacrificed all your relationships to get it? Generosity and taking the risk on loving is a better form of investment.

This is ancient wisdom. There's an old rabbinic story known as the tale of the long spoons, in which someone asks God to be shown heaven and hell. They are shown into a room with a table filled with a sumptuous feast, and a lot of very glum people sitting round it. God explains: 'This is hell.' 'Why are they looking so miserable?' 'Well, there is only one rule here: they have to use spoons that are six feet long and they are only allowed to hold them by the end of the handle. So they can't get the food into their mouths.' God then shows the enquirer into another room, where there is another table. 'This is heaven.' The people sitting round it are chatting happily in anticipation of the feast about to begin. 'I get it' the enquirer says: 'they don't have the rule about using the end of the handle of the spoon here.' 'Oh, it's the same rule', says God. 'The difference here is that they have learned that if you put food into someone else's mouth, they will do the same for you.'

If we stop to think about it, all the things that matter most to us in life - love, relationship, trust, wisdom, justice – increase as we share them. By contrast, with wealth and power there's a sense around that if someone else has more, I must have less. It generates the fear of scarcity that underlies so much aggressiveness in human behaviour. Instead, the qualities of the Kingdom of heaven, which allow us to relate more deeply to God, ourselves and others, are rich enough for both giver and receiver to benefit.

The question this parable asks of us is: where do our true priorities lie? Of course we wish to provide for ourselves and our families. Of course we are anxious about the future – these are worrying times. But there is also a question of responsibility to those in need, and of placing our ultimate trust in a God of abundance who abandoned all security by coming among us and showing us the potential of a world in which the hungry are fed, the poor receive justice and relationships of love lie at the heart of all creation. For life, in the end, is about loving relationship – with God, with others and the creation. It is what we were made for. It's worth recalling Jesus told this parable because someone who was arguing with his brother about money had appealed to him to intervene. The parable stands as a reminder that relationship matters more.

It is sometimes said that enough is as good as a feast. The feast we have come together to share today in this Eucharist is a reminder of God's all-sufficient love, and a foretaste of the feast we will share in heaven. It is good that we have gathered, for our spiritual lives matter. That's the message of each one of our readings today, from King Solomon's words in the Book of Ecclesiastes to Paul's Letter to the Colossians. And Jesus's teaching in this part of Luke's Gospel offers the assurance that, if we look after the spiritual dimension of our inner lives, if we can learn to focus our awareness on the presence of a loving God, we will be less anxious, less preoccupied with ourselves and better able to live outwards, oriented towards God, one another and the world around us. We can choose the life of the Kingdom over our self-concern. And learn how to eat with long spoons.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 12th Sunday after Trinity

4th September 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

As we look back through our lives, we are often aware of the people who had a formative influence on us. It may be the people who taught us, family and friends who guided us through difficult times, or those who inspired us in the Christian faith. I wonder who your formative influences have been.

For my part, one figure in the third category was Sydney Evans, the former Dean of King's College London who became Dean of Salisbury Cathedral around the time my family moved to live in that city in the 1970s. Listening to his sermons in those far off days was one of the things that inspired me to explore faith in greater depth and, in due course, to offer myself for ordination. His deep engagement with the issues of the day, holding them in the light of the Gospel, somehow felt like a window being opened onto eternity.

One of the notable things which Sydney Evans did while Dean of Salisbury was to commission a new East window for the Cathedral from the workshop of Gabriel Loire in Chartres, a bold twentieth century addition to a twelfth century building. The window is dedicated to prisoners of conscience, men and women imprisoned for their beliefs, suffering for their faith. The central sections of the

window show Christ as a prisoner of conscience, the victim of a show trial, mocked, crowned with thorns and crucified. The predominant colour of the window is dark blue, but from Christ's head on the Cross comes a triangle of light that shines on the faces of the prisoners surrounding him, while in the centre a shaft of golden light descends from heaven. It's the first piece of glass that is lit by the rising sun each day: the light of resurrection infusing human suffering.

As I was reflecting on today's readings, something made me pick up a book by Sydney Evans, in which I discovered he had written a sermon on the text we heard from the Book of Deuteronomy. It comes when Moses has just completed the giving of the Law to the people of Israel as they stand on the threshold of the promised land: 'See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity… Choose life.' Evans points out the paradox of those words, in that our existence is the one thing we don't actually choose. But, as we mature, we learn that our choices matter. We constantly have to choose, and we grow in stature by the seriousness and moral courage of our choices.

That sort of choice is what the author of Deuteronomy is referring to. It is also the sort of choice Jesus is alluding to in our Gospel reading: 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. … none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.' Jesus is a master of hyperbole, of using exaggeration to make a point. He uses three strong images, each of which is echoed elsewhere in the Gospel. There is the statement about having to 'hate' family – elsewhere he urges his followers not to use family commitments as an excuse to put off discipleship. Then there is the requirement to carry one's

cross, prefiguring the crucifixion. Finally there is the statement about not letting possessions get in the way, a thread which runs throughout the Gospel accounts. Jesus is aware how much our tendency to seek material security limits our ability to look beyond ourselves and become generous and life-giving.

These three images encourage us to pause and reflect. What choices do we make? Where do we put our loyalties? As ever, Jesus challenges us to be honest with ourselves, to see what we need to change if we are to live life to the full. 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' (John 10.10) The message of the images in today's Gospel is that our ultimate allegiance is to the kingdom of God. If we put God's priorities first, we unlock a radical new way of being. Last week Scott spoke to us about the Taizé Community in eastern France, which members join with only the robes they stand up in, having given everything else away to those in need - an act of humility and trust that is humbling to the rest of us.

The basic conviction of both the Jewish and Christian faiths is that God is the essential dimension in whom we live and move and have our being. God addresses us, a voice speaking at the centre of our being from among all that is relative and contradictory about our world. God says: 'I offer you the choice of life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life.'

As Sydney Evans puts it: 'This is God's demand; that we shall take responsibility for what others have made us and for the direction in which we move, the priorities to which we aspire. … [I]n this necessity to choose, our *humanity* is made possible. … To become human, God demands that we come out from behind the barricades of our defensiveness; that we face life as it comes, openly and undefended. Becoming really human is bound up with being set free from

this need to defend myself, to justify myself... Really human persons when we meet them are without defensiveness: they are vulnerable, ready to suffer whatever may be the consequences of being open to serve the truest well-being of others.'

That is how Jesus lived and died. He affirmed his identity by rejecting all defensiveness. And the effect of the death and resurrection of Jesus was to make available for others extraordinary resources for living courageously and creatively. His friends became transformed by it, ready to die for their faith. Evans writes: 'The undefended Jesus was crucified by fearful people on the defensive. Jesus chose life. By choosing life he was done to death: but his dying was the moment for the liberation into the life-stream of humanity of new and wonderful resources for living.'

We see an example of this in Paul's Letter to Philemon, an intriguing document that offers a radical vision of the Christian way, overturning more than one set of assumptions of Paul's time. The Letter is written to Philemon, the owner of a slave called Onesimus, who appears to have run away from his master and to have stolen something – probably money. However, Onesimus has encountered Paul in prison, who has converted him to Christianity as he had already done for Philemon. In his letter Paul asks Philemon to accept Onesimus back, no longer as a slave but as a Christian brother. Not to punish him but to forgive him. That would have been a radically new approach to crime and punishment, and to the whole concept of slavery, for a first century writer. Philemon is left with the choice of how to react. We don't know what he did, but the Letter leaves us with the question – how would we respond? Would we, in doing so, choose life, and give life?

Prisoners of conscience were perceived by Sydney Evans as the supreme example from the late twentieth century of what it means to make difficult moral choices in the face of great challenge, of what it means to witness to a faith against the odds. That's what the window he commissioned speaks of still. It's why the Christian faith still challenges those with secular power across the world to account for themselves. Such challenge is needed more than ever today.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 13th Sunday after Trinity

11th September 2022

Eglise du Sacré-Coeur, Oppède

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

When the news came through from Balmoral on Thursday evening, the Church of England put into action a plan prepared for the day that many hoped would never arrive. Guidance was issued about alternative hymns and readings that would be suitable for any service that followed the announcement of the Queen's death. But when we looked at the Gospel reading set for today we decided not to change it, as it seemed somehow appropriate. For Her Majesty's vision of the kingdom over which she reigned, and of the Kingdom of heaven, was a wide and inclusive one.

She spoke increasingly about her faith in recent years, particularly when giving her annual broadcast message at Christmas. In a recent one (2014), she said: 'For me, the life of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, whose birth we celebrate today, is an inspiration and an anchor in my life. A role model of reconciliation and forgiveness, he stretched out his hands in love, acceptance and healing. Christ's example has taught me to seek to respect and value all people, of whatever faith or none.'

In our Gospel reading today, the scribes and Pharisees are complaining about the company Jesus kept – untouchables, who did not obey the letter of the laws by which they ordered their own lives. Jesus responds by telling them three parables: the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost child. (The parable that comes immediately after our reading today is the one we usually refer to as the Prodigal Son.)

Shepherds in ancient Judaea had a difficult job. They were responsible for the flock within their care and had to account for them personally if they died. So sometimes they had to risk life and limb to recover them. Flocks were often communal, so it was a matter of general rejoicing if a shepherd returned with a sheep that had been rescued. This is the image Jesus draws of God – as delighted by the change of heart in a human being (which is literally what 'repentance' means) as a shepherd reunited with an endangered sheep he had feared was lost.

The image of the woman searching for the coin is an interesting one. As well as referring to the significance of losing money in a household where there was little to spare, the coin may have been a reference to the head-dress of a married woman, which was made of ten silver coins held together by a silver chain – more or less the equivalent of a wedding ring. If you lost part of that, you *would* look high and low for it and celebrate with your friends when you found it. God, Jesus indicates, is like that.

I suspect that, for some of us, the invitation in these stories to rejoice over someone who gone astray and come back may be a bit unsettling. We can just about get to grips with the idea of people receiving forgiveness for the wrong they have done, but are we not more often inclined to be like the Pharisees, to

respond like the elder sibling in the parable of the prodigal? Tight-lipped disapproval, with just a hint of envy. Being asked to rejoice sounds a bit much.

But we are dealing with a God who is kinder than we are, and extravagantly so. Time and again, Jesus tells of God's overwhelming love for humanity. We notice how unconditional these parables in Luke are. There seems to be no criticism of the sinners. It is in the nature of sheep that they go astray, of small coins that they go missing, and of our children that they sometimes get into a mess. What happened to the one could happen to any of the others. Notice the numerical progression in these stories – one out of ninety-nine sheep, one out of ten coins, one out of two sons. Jesus is saying: 'This could be you.'

And that is the point. None of us is immune from messing things up. Yet forgiveness is at the heart of the Gospel. The Queen understood this well. In another of her Christmas broadcasts (2011) she said this: 'Forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian faith. It can heal broken families, it can restore friendships and it can reconcile divided communities. It is in forgiveness that we feel the power of God's love.' That's how she managed to shake the hand of Martin McGuinness, former leader of the IRA, during her state visit to the Republic of Ireland in 2011, some thirty years after her uncle-in-law, Lord Mountbatten, had died in an IRA terrorist attack.

As humans, we might say that 99 out of 100 is a good enough score, but it's not enough for God. Limitless energy is channelled into rescuing the one who would otherwise be lost. Each of us matters infinitely to God. That is why the words 'for I have found the one which was lost' are so beautiful. For there are times in our lives when we all feel lost – whether through actual loss of health, employment, relationship, reputation, getting things wrong, losing a sense of

meaning and purpose, or just feeling overwhelmed by life – and at those times, to be found, understood and accepted may feel little short of miraculous. And this is true above all when we have no one but ourselves to blame for the mess we are in. But we are dealing with a God who knows us better than ourselves. Even the worst bits. We continue to find a welcome and a forgiveness that are as baffling as they are beautiful. And if we are unsure of that, we have only to look at the Scriptures, where we find the story of God's searching written all over them.

But loss is real, and it hurts. Even though, rationally, we might say to ourselves that at the time of her death Her Majesty was 96, had lived a full life of devotion and service, was surrounded by people who loved and respected her, had died supported by a deep Christian faith, so that in the circumstances we should not be sad – well, not everything is rational. Many are feeing bereft after losing such a source of stability and comfort in their lives, living as we are through rapid and great change.

The Queen's resilience was something she freely shared, perhaps never more so than during the pandemic, when she broadcast a message of comfort to the United Kingdom (just as the Prime Minister was being admitted to hospital), or when she appeared alone at the funeral of Prince Philip, in solidarity with all those unable to grieve collectively at the loss of their loved ones.

Loss is also a word which marks this day, for it is the anniversary of 9/11, the day on which 3000 people lost their lives in New York. A day when the worst and best of human behaviour was on show, in an event that for a while seemed to destabilise the world order. Yet the Queen's approach to world affairs, honed over seventy years of engagement, was consistently one of unity and

reconciliation. She strove, in the words of St Francis of Assisi, to be a channel of God's peace.

The God who continues to search us out each day in radical, life-changing love.

The God who will one day bring us home, in company with Her Majesty and all who have gone before us. I'm not a fan of the strand of Christianity which says that heaven is reserved for those who hold a narrow set of beliefs, or keep to a particular set of behaviours, policed by church officials. I liked it when I heard the Queen say: 'Christ's example has taught me to seek to respect and value all people of whatever faith or none.' Society, and the church, are good at telling people they are excluded, for whatever reason. We live in a peculiarly judgmental age. Yet the Queen's approach was different: inclusive, unifying, reconciling. Although many have said that her Christian faith was traditional in its expression, I would actually suggest that its expression was at times quite radical.

Another Christmas message (2004): 'For me, as a Christian, one of the most important … teachings is contained in the parable of the Good Samaritan, when Jesus answers the question, 'Who is my neighbour?' It is a timeless story of a victim of a mugging who was ignored by his own countrymen but helped by a foreigner – and a despised foreigner at that. The implication drawn by Jesus is clear. Everyone is our neighbour, no matter what race, creed or colour. The need to look after a fellow human being is far more important than any cultural or religious differences.' Tell me that isn't radical.

We could go on reflecting on Her Majesty's deep Christian faith. There will be an opportunity to do so next Saturday when we gather in Marseille for our Service of Commemoration. But for now let us come back to today's Gospel, with its message of reconciling love, modelled so often by the Queen herself.

If - when – we find it hard to believe that we are lovable because we have messed things up so badly, let us remind ourselves of these stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost child, in which Jesus assures us that the God he called Abba, Father, loves us even though he knows what we are capable of. And that when we turn up at his table dishevelled, disgraced or dismayed, he will surprise us by putting a fine robe on our shoulders, and shoes on our feet, and say 'Come, and eat'. It's what we will do in a few minutes, at his table here.

And, as we do so, let us give thanks for the long life of Her Majesty and pray for her son as he takes up his responsibilities. And perhaps we may remember these words which she spoke about her own experience of what faith means:

> 'Each day is a new beginning, I know that the only way to live my life is to try to do what is right, to take the long view, to give of my best in all that the day brings, and to put my trust in God.'

You can't say fairer than that.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Harvest Thanksgiving – 9th October 2022

Jane Quarmby, Reader

Celebrating the safe gathering in of the year's crops is ages old, with a good harvest signifying plenty for the year ahead, and a poor harvest meaning people would go hungry. It's perhaps something that city dwellers find something of an anachronism, but this year, with the war in Ukraine stopping the export of wheat from the world's biggest producer, perhaps even the most urban are realising just where their food comes from and how important the farming industry is.

Traditionally, in Britain, Harvest Festival was held on the 1st of August, at the beginning of the harvest and was called Lammas, or loaf harvest, after the special loaves baked from the first corn and used for communion. Farmers would lay on a lavish supper at the end of the harvest to thank the workers, for they would recruit anyone who could help, from reapers to stackers. Old school attendance records show that many of the children in farming areas were absent from classes at harvest time. Leftover corn would be left in the field for the poor to glean, to see them through the winter.

In rural areas today, churches are decorated with flowers and garden produce and in a benefice or chaplaincy like ours, harvest will be celebrated in each church on different Sundays. This relatively modern tradition began in 1843, in Morwenstow in Cornwall, when the Revd Robert Hawker held a special thanksgiving service at his church. Victorian hymns like Come, ye Thankful People Come, and All things Bright and Beautiful, along with Dutch and German hymns like We Plough the Fields and Scatter became popular and decorating the church became a much loved ritual. As did the supper afterwards in the church hall, with a distribution of the goods given to those who needed them, or in wealthier parishes, raffled off and the money given to charity. Here in our own chaplaincy we are delivering our

offerings to the local Restos du Coeur, and in Manosque next Sunday, we are having our own Harvest Supper after the service. (Everyone welcome!)

In our last parish, deep in rural Northamptonshire, Harvest Festival brought one of the few rare sightings of the local farmers in church, looking most uncomfortable in their good suits and ties. They even produced old farming implements, wooden ploughs and scythes, to decorate the ancient church and a big sheaf of corn.

But one year we had a locum priest who had ministered in Coventry, where there were no farms, but a lot of heavy engineering. His church would be "decorated" not with flowers, fruit and vegetables, but with Rolls Royce engines, as people gave thanks for the fruit of their labours in heavy engineering and the like. And we too changed our decorations – models of lorries to reflect the transport industry, laptops to represent office work amongst the apples and marrows, and so on. In towns and cities there's a growing emphasis on thanking God for all our labour and productivity in all forms of work, plus a growing awareness of and concern for people less fortunate than ourselves, people who are still reliant on a good harvest and for whom drought and disaster don't mean inconvenience and less Weetabix in the supermarket, but disaster and famine.

This year in particular, has brought a new emphasis to us all. Just as we thought we were coming out of the Covid pandemic, we were hit by something we probably all fervently wished we would never see – war in Europe, as Russia invaded Ukraine. Sanctions on Russia were brought in by America and the West, and prices of fuel and goods in the shops soared. Economic warfare has ensued, and it is the poorest who suffer the most. If that weren't enough, we have had one of the hottest driest summers on record in Europe, with devastating consequences. Farmers and gardeners have had to watch their crops wither and die. Animals have had little to no grazing, even up in the mountains due to a lack of rain. Fires have broken out, devastating vast swathes of woodland. In other areas of the world such as Pakistan, they have had widespread flooding, with no sign of the waters receding for another 2 or 3 months, decimating their crops.

It's tempting to look at Jesus's words in John's Gospel telling us not to look for food which perishes but for the food of eternal life from God as easier said than done. Hunger, physical hunger, is all too real. But perhaps Jesus isn't talking to the starving, he's talking to those who have enough and some to spare. It's they who

have the ability to not only assuage the hunger of those without food, but at the same time build up their store of good deeds which will be recognised by God. By sharing what we have with those who have so much less, we are doing God's work.

Harvest is a time of thanksgiving – literally to give thanks to God for his generosity. It's something the early settlers took to America, when they give thanks on Thanksgiving Day, for safe passage and finding food at the other end. Those first settlers founded the most powerful nation on earth. But they also founded one where there is a huge gap between the very rich and the very poor.

Here in Europe, we have sophisticated economies which have provision for the poor and the jobless. It's easy to say that's all sorted out and we don't need to worry about it. But we too have children who are malnourished, families with nowhere to go, homeless people living on the streets, penniless migrants. It was heart-warming to see the welcome given to Ukrainian refugees as people stood in line to offer clothes, food and accommodation to people fleeing their home country with what they stood up in. It is amazing what people can do as individuals, to make a difference to some-one else. We may not be able to solve world poverty on our own, but we can solve another person's needs.

At Christmas we have a Bishops appeal for a nominated charity. But perhaps it's at Harvest that we as a church, as a chaplaincy, should be looking at what we give to others to help them in a harsh world. As we give thanks for all that God has given us, not only for our families, friends, jobs and income, homes, fresh clean water and plenty of food around in the shops, it's sobering to realise that all that we take for granted isn't something that others have. To them it's just a dream.

There is enough and more in the world to go around. But it's not evenly distributed and that's where we all have a role to play. If we want to look forward to the food for eternal life, we need to start shopping for it now, before it's too late. Collectively, we have the power to stop the pollution of the world, to stop our oceans being filled with plastic, to stop cutting down the trees and digging up the peat bogs that are the lungs of this planet, to grow healthy food without chemicals, to bring clean water to those without it, to raise animals for food outside on clean pasture, to put right the damage we have done resulting in floods and droughts. If we all do our bit in our own backyard, it adds up. No, we can't do it on our own. My glut of tomatoes won't stop world poverty. But I can give them away to people

without gardens, with big families and not much money. I can make them into chutney and sell them at the Christmas Fair for charity. Every little helps.

When we have to answer to God, will we have an answer to the questions about our own harvest – “what help did you give to others? When did you feed the hungry, clothe the poor, house the homeless, give water to the thirsty? When did you use the gifts and abilities given to you to help others?”. Let's stop meaning to do it and as a former colleague of mine used it say, “Do it now!”

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – All Saints' Day

30th October 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd James Johnston, Chaplain

I wonder if you can hear them?

The current level of dysfunction in parliamentary life, both in France and the UK, is giving the media a field day. Everything we read or hear is laced with doom. This winter is going to be the 'worst anyone can remember'. There will be shortages of (according to the focus of the commentator) electricity, gas, food, petrol, hospital beds, doctors, nurses, dentists, teachers, pharmacists, microprocessors. It has brought a whole new dimension to 'doom-scrolling', as unlimited articles roll by telling us that things have never been so bad.

It is undoubtedly true that serious problems lie ahead. Both the cost of living crisis and the future economic outlook are particularly worrying. The COP27 summit will bring more bad news about the climate emergency. The multiple threats posed by the conflict in Ukraine are felt across the world, most of all by those directly suffering the effects of warfare. These are deeply challenging times.

And yet. Something else also happens at this time of year. Into the gloom erupts a dazzling procession of light, colour, sound, story, legend, courage, outrageousness, fierce integrity and improbable glory that we call the Communion of Saints. A procession of people who were vital, outspoken, determined, awkward and, often in the minds of those they encountered, not suitable company to keep. I suspect many of us tend to think of saints in terms of a still piety, beautiful in art and stained glass, conveying a sense of being impossible to live up to. Perhaps we need to rethink that.

The one thing the saints didn't waste time doing was doom-scrolling. They were far too busy living. Getting to the heart of things, searching out the deepest meaning of what it is to be human and to live with integrity. The saints break in on our reveries of how difficult times are now. They bring their own histories of war, persecution and plague, of sacrifice, justice and healing, and they encourage us to live life counter-culturally as followers of Christ. As one modern commentator has put it, 'Saints are human beings who live their lives in such a way that you think 'I'll have what she's having' '[1]. Intensely alive, accepting with both hands Christ's offer of life in all its fullness, even though many of them suffered and died for what they stood for.

When we say in the Creed that we believe in the Communion of Saints, we are acknowledging that these men and women are our companions, assuring us that the road we walk, with all its challenges, is the road they have walked before us and that we are not alone.

[1] Lucy Winkett, *Reading the Bible with your Feet* (2021).

The saints are not only the older ones - apostles, early martyrs and figures from the medieval tradition. There are many modern saints too. Examples from the last hundred years are too numerous to mention, but any list would include Oscar Romero (the Archbishop of El Salvador who spoke out against oppression and was shot while celebrating Mass in 1980), Maximilian Kolbe (the Polish Franciscan friar who in 1941 volunteered to die in place of a stranger at Auschwitz because the stranger had a wife and children) and Edith Cavell (the British nurse executed for helping captured soldiers escape in First World War Belgium, tending the injured on both sides of the conflict, who died saying she must have no hatred or bitterness for anyone). And, closer to home, Arnaud Beltrame, the gendarme who in 2018 took the place of a hostage in a supermarket shooting in Carcassonne, dying in the subsequent negotiations with the gunman.

Then there are what are known as the 'ordinary saints', those who have simply lived out their baptism by being an influence for good on those around them. You will know who your own 'ordinary saints' have been. Transparent to the grace of God, open to the renewing, forgiving and affirming spirit of Christ. We celebrate them too on this day, and will name some when we come to our prayers of intercession, amongst the loved ones we will remember on All Souls' Day this Wednesday.

Saints are those who make us think 'yes, that's what God requires of us'. Like the prophet Micah, who completed that sentence with the words: 'to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God'. (Micah 6.8) They often model the beatitudes we heard in our Gospel reading from St Luke this morning.

Luke's beatitudes – those sentences of Jesus that begin with the words 'Blessed are' – are different from the ones in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew's appear in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus has gone up a mountainside to teach. In Luke, Jesus has come down from a mountain where he has been praying, coming among the people in need. Luke the physician, is preoccupied with the relief of suffering. His beatitudes are about a community of followers standing with the dispossessed, the marginalised, the grieving. Practising the presence of Christ where the world is in pain.

For Luke, faith begins with compassion and care, not a system of belief. He knows well that if people go and do something for people in greater need than they are, they will discover that they receive more than they give. That's something which 'ordinary saints' are good at. And today , our Patronal Festival, is a good day to give thanks for them and all they have given us.

It's been suggested that there are two things in particular which mark out saints, both of which give them freedom. One is holiness, that focus on the inner life that brings us closer to God in the ordinary business of living. Saints don't spend their lives wishing things were different. They start from where they are and find meaning and purpose in that. It gives them freedom to act.

The second thing that marks out saints is their ability to live in the dimension of the eternal. A few weeks ago I visited the room outside Saint-Rémy-de-Provence where the artist Vincent Van Gogh lived and worked for a year. When asked why he painted as he did, he said it was because he wanted to show that human beings had something of the eternal about them: 'I want to paint people with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolise, and which I seek to convey by the radiance … of my colouring'.

The point about saints living in the dimension of the eternal is that the fear of death is removed by their freedom to accept it. They live the same life as everyone else, but they march to the beat of a different drum. They are earthed, but they hear too the heartbeat of heaven as they move through this world with love, saying (in the words of Dag Hammarskjold, former Secretary General of the United Nations):

> 'For all that has been, thanks;
> To all that shall be, yes!'

Glimpsing these things asks us: how might we allow the spirit of Christ to dwell in us? How might we find wholeness and a sense of the eternal? Maybe we could become more extravagant - with our patience, our forgiveness, our love? There's nothing to stop us trying. It's why we give thanks today for that extraordinary procession we call the Communion of Saints, as they invade our consciousness with the sound of their song in the holy and eternal light of heaven.

I wonder if you can hear them?

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon

4th December 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd James Johnston, Chaplain

Last week I was on a diocesan training course in Germany. It reminded me how dark it gets in northern Europe at this time of year - days when it barely seems to get light as thick cloud covers the landscape, and by mid-afternoon such light as there is beginning to fade. It was a relief to get back to Provence with its blue skies. Darkness and light are prominent as we move deeper into Advent.

The training course was held in the Kardinal Schulte Haus conference centre in Cologne. The building opened in 1929 as a seminary for training Jesuit priests. Twelve years later, it was commandeered by the Gestapo during the Second World War. Now the building is back to training priests again. Those 'sandwich years' of occupation during the War served as a reminder of the darkness and light found in human behaviour. The chapel in the conference centre is dedicated to Edith Stein, the German Jewish philosopher who became a Carmelite nun and who died at Auschwitz. The chapel is furnished almost entirely with metal, the pews decorated with a motif of barbed wire. I thought of my father, a prisoner of war, and how grim he would have found the chapel furniture.

I thought also of Alfred Delp, the German Jesuit priest executed in 1945 for his opposition to Nazism. Shortly before he died, Delp wrote a powerful reflection from his prison cell entitled 'The Shaking Reality of Advent'. It begins with the words: 'There is perhaps nothing we modern people need more than to be genuinely shaken up'. He notes how in the years leading up to the War people had been living with a false sense of security, but that it is when we feel our world shaking that we are able to face reality, to 'awaken from sleep', as St Paul urges, and (in Delp's words) to 'put things back where God the Lord put them', to 'set our life in God's order'.

To some extent, our times too carry a sense of being shaken in the way Delp described (though he was living through a more extreme crisis). Covid, Ukraine, economic turmoil, shortages, strikes, the climate emergency. Delp wrote: 'Advent is a time when we ought to be shaken and brought to a realisation of ourselves. The necessary condition for the fulfilment of Advent is the renunciation of the presumptuous attitudes and alluring dreams … by … which we always build ourselves imaginary worlds.' It is very much the message of our Gospel reading this morning, as John the Baptist proclaims: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

At this point, Delp's reflection shifts in tone. He points out that 'shocked awakening' is not our only experience of Advent. Advent is also blessed with God's promises, which 'kindle the inner light in our hearts'. In the midst of our bitter awakening, 'the golden threads that pass between heaven and earth … reach us', giving the world a taste of the abundance it can have. Advent is a time of inner security, in which our task is to share its message of hope with others.

Delp observed that in his time (and the same is surely true of our own): 'So many need their courage strengthened, so many are in despair and in need of consolation, there is so much harshness that needs a gentle hand and an illuminating word, so much loneliness crying out for a word of release, so much loss and pain in search of inner meaning.' Advent is the promise denoting the new order of things, though we must wait for the promise to be realised. The reflection ends: 'Just beyond the horizon the eternal realities stand silent in their age-old longing. There shines on us the first … light of the radiant fulfilment to come.' I don't know how someone writes that in the face of execution, but Alfred Delp did. In one of his last letters, he wrote: 'All of life is Advent.'

The persistent thought I had during the days spent at Kardinal Schulte Haus, conscious of its 'sandwich years', was that in the 1940s good had triumphed over evil. Evil continues to stalk humanity. It is real and it is there. We need look no further than Ukraine. But ultimately good is stronger. That's the message of the incarnation, in the great prologue of St John the Evangelist which we will hear again at Christmas: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'

Last week the results were published of a census taken in the United Kingdom in 2021. For the first time, in answer to the question on the census form 'What is your religion'?', less than half the population replied 'Christian'. Instead, for their religion, they put 'none'. Predictably, the secular organisations have been crowing. Yet I wonder what the answer would have been if the question had been put in a different way: 'Do you believe there is a spiritual dimension to existence?' or 'Do you believe in the ultimate power of good to triumph over

evil?'' I suspect many more than half of the respondents would answer 'yes' to questions like that.

The challenge for the church is to reach with its message of hope those people who write 'none' on their census forms, many of whom 'are in despair and in need of consolation', who find themselves in 'so much loss and pain in search of inner meaning'. Those longing to translate the mystery and wonder and pain and beauty of human existence into something that makes sense to them. We notice this longing particularly in Advent. People have been ringing the chaplaincy since September asking what we are doing at Christmas. 'Longing for light, we wait in darkness', in the words of the hymn writer. For, however they fill out their forms, people long for light in the darkness. They long for a time when wars will cease, when creation will live in harmony and everyone will find meaning and purpose in the knowledge of the ultimate goodness that lies at the heart things. In short, for the vision articulated in the extract from the Book of the prophet Isaiah which we heard this morning.

The extract is full of the prophet's hope of the promised Messiah, the Christ, who was to come:

> 'The wolf shall live with the lamb,
> the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
> the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
> and a little child shall lead them …
> They will not hurt or destroy
> on all my holy mountain…'

That's why this reading is included in the service of Nine Lessons and Carols which we will hear again this Saturday. It's of the nine extracts from Scripture

which the Bidding Prayer in that service calls 'the tale of the loving purposes of God'. Dean Eric Milner-Write, who wrote the prayer in the shadow of the First World War, and introduced the reading from Isaiah with the words 'The peace that Christ will bring is foreshown', understood that Easter was the embodiment of what this passage is about. For Easter is a new dawn, a reconciliation of creation, an overcoming of death, a proclamation of a justice that is not about vengeance. And the reason we are here today is to celebrate the fact that there was such a person as Jesus of Nazareth whom we call the Christ, and to walk in his footsteps. So let us start walking, and bring some hope to those around us.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon

3rd Sunday of Advent – 11th December 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

Today is the third Sunday in Advent – already! I didn't see the time go by! With all the rushing here and there, we can feel lost in the weeks leading up to Christmas and lose sight of the things for which we long most deeply, like joy.

Where is true joy in your life this Advent season? In the expectation of family and friends getting together? In the anticipation of Christmas cheer? Of light that dispels the darkness?

I ask you because this is Gaudete Sunday - a day which takes its name from the first word of the chant the Mass used to start with in the Middle Ages: "Rejoice in the Lord, always; again I say: rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4)

It is a paradoxical Sunday in the church year. Some of the readings encourage hopefulness and joy. "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom," promises prophet Isaiah. "Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God," declares the Psalmist.

And then, just when we were about to feel uplifted, John the Baptist takes centre stage. If there's one thing I cannot associate with John, that's joy. We never hear him saying, "Rejoice! The kingdom of heaven is near." Only "Repent!"

Last week, Matthew took us to the wilderness of Judea to get to know John, who lived dramatically, wearing clothing of camel's hair, eating whatever he could find there – locusts, wild honey – preaching a strong message of repentance and preparing the hearts of the people who flocked to listen to him to receive the Messiah. He offered them a baptism of repentance, as a symbol of liberation from

the slavery of sin, which made people ready to greet their Saviour. He followed his calling with zeal and passion.

Today, Matthew takes us to a prison cell, to a broken John the Baptist. As far as John can tell, the Messiah, who was expected to make the world new, to bring justice and order to human institutions, has changed nothing. Nothing has worked out as this disillusioned prisoner thought it would, and all he has left is a question for Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Remember that John was expecting the Messiah to come with the fire of judgment: "His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Instead, Jesus came with mercy and forgiveness, and a willingness to suffer for the sake of God's kingdom. What kind of Messiah was that? It was the Messiah God intended, not the one John had imagined. Jesus came and did the works of God: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." What more to expect of the one who is to come?

What do <u>we</u> expect of the Christ at his coming among us? We want him to give clear helpful answers to our questions – now. We want him to relieve us from our burdens – now. We want evidence that a great transformation is truly underway – now. Patience is a virtue difficult to be practised.

Even after the rejoicing of two thousand Christmases, we come back, again and again, to the place of wilderness, the place of yearning and waiting for the coming of Christ that is promised but that we don't really understand – as John the Baptist seemed not to have understood. We are discouraged by the apparently slow progress of all our efforts, and by the reappearance of the powers of evil and their apparent victories. Because of the noise around us – and in us – we so often do not hear the gentle sound and the movement of the life that is coming into being.

But here and there, God lets us feel how he is at work. The light will shine, perhaps just when it seems to us that the darkness is impenetrable.

All his life John waited for the Messiah; his lifestyle, his very body is shaped by this expectation. Yet he had to convert his idea of God's Messiah. Like John, we too are

called to recognise that God does not always come into our lives the way we expect. Advent is a good time of converting our idea of God and recognising new or different ways Christ comes into our lives.

Jesus Christ comes even now with a gentle strength, and brings the fullness of God's kingdom. Not to satisfy all of our personal expectations, but to satisfy the deepest needs and longings of the whole creation: healing and hope; forgiveness and new life. The need for God's presence, and God's promise, that we belong to God no matter what!

Joy emerges from the deep belief that in the end, as in the beginning, God rules the world. And that sin and evil cannot erase the fundamental goodness with which God endowed his creation. Joy believes that goodness and grace endure and will one day be all in all.

Do you see God at work? Through those who pray and work for peace? As people support and care for those who are struggling? As forgiveness is offered and received, and reconciliation begins? This is the season of joy – there are reasons to rejoice and give thanks.

But, even as I say that, I know that it's not always easy to rejoice. Despite the merchandised cheeriness of the season, many find themselves in places of wilderness, of dryness, places of weak hands and feeble knees, of fearful hearts, places where eyes are blind and ears are deaf and legs are lame and tongues made speechless. You may have cares and concerns that are quenching your joy. And to be told to rejoice today may only be adding to your cares, not taking them away.

The spiritual writer Henri Nouwen once said: "Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day. It is a choice based on the knowledge that we belong to God and have found in God our refuge and our safety and that nothing, not even death, can take God away from us."

Looking for joy on this Gaudete Sunday doesn't mean ignoring all that is wrong in the world. But it does mean paying attention to what is right, what is of God, what is a sign that God is still at work in the world, in our congregation, in our community. Tell what you hear and see as you proclaim the joy of the presence of God. And pray that we ourselves become signs of the kingdom to those who are watching and waiting for God, and that the world be transformed when we pass through.

May we awaken on Christmas morning to the joy of life transformed in Christ, unexpected, more than we had dared even to ask for.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon

25th December 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd James Johnston, Chaplain

I wonder what it will be like celebrating Christmas in Ukraine this year. One of the most remarkable people I have met over the last ten months is Christina Laschenko, churchwarden of Christ Church Kyiv, a fellow Anglican chaplaincy in the Diocese in Europe. I haven't met her, of course, but thanks to our Diocese organising a series of online services of prayer for Ukraine over the course of the year, I feel I have got to know her a little through her reports of daily life in Kyiv, her reflections on what it means to live as a follower of Christ through these times, and through her prayers.

Christina and her family live under enormous pressure, yet she always seems poised; she is articulate, but her language is simple and direct; she is poetic, but also practical; she speaks of fear, but her posture is unflinching; and she prays from the heart. A few days ago she spoke at the last of the online Advent services of the fact that three times that day Kyiv had been subject to air raids, which had left half the city without power. Yet she went on speak of the resilience of the citizens. Behind her were Christmas decorations, yet in the city bombs were falling - a reminder that we live in dark times.

Yet darkness has always existed. Jesus was born into a world that was cruel and violent: a world of slavery and brutal occupation by a foreign power, a world of torture and injustice, where a particularly horrible means of death had been devised for those who challenged the system – crucifixion.

Those who first wrote the Christmas story knew what they were doing when they contrasted light and darkness, good and evil, hope and despair, when they wrote of the astonishing claim that the source of all that exists was to be found cradled in a young mother's arms. The life-giving creative Spirit, made known in the one called Jesus. In the words of St John which we have just heard read: '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.'

We too face and share the darkness of human life. I don't know what darkness means for you, or for those you love and care for, this Christmas. Perhaps it is illness, chronic or sudden; the pain of loss or grief; or inner fears and anxieties. Sometimes darkness is so pervasive that we feel we can never fully avoid it. But what the birth of Jesus says is that darkness does not have the last word. That the light is to be trusted, even when we cannot see it.

Christmas reminds us that we have to do with a God who is not remote from us, but one who suffers for us and with us and who loves each one of us with a love beyond anything we can imagine. In the end our minds are not enough to comprehend it. We are invited instead to respond with our hearts.

Across the world, people are gathering in churches today because somehow they sense that in this child, and in the man he became, we come close to the

heart of God. That in Christ we are given the assurance that God is with us, one with us in our living and our dying. A God who is Christ-like, as loving and compassionate and forgiving as Jesus was. People gather on this day because they believe that, when we respond to others with instinctive acts of kindness and compassion, we are at our most authentically human, most truly ourselves, most like him. It's one of the timeless truths we glimpse again at Christmas. Christina Laschenko said on Wednesday that experience of daily life in Kyiv at the moment has shown how simple acts of love become 'a huge experience' of solidarity and hope.

To celebrate Christmas is to refuse to allow ourselves to be brought down by the darkness of the times. It is to renew our hope and trust in the God revealed in Christ, the light that shines which the darkness has not and will not overcome. To pray with others in places of suffering is to remind ourselves that we are all connected, that our compassion – our 'suffering with' – is what makes us human. And that the supreme expression of that desire and commitment to 'suffer with' is to be found in the child of Bethlehem.

A few years ago I visited Bethlehem and the country surrounding it. For those who don't know its current geography, it is in the occupied West Bank. You have to go through armed checkpoints to get to it. Our guide showed us the hillside on which it is said that the shepherds heard the angels' song on the night of Christ's birth. 'Don't walk there', he said, 'because it is full of mines'.

Following this child, and the man he became, is a risky affair. It can lead us into all sorts of trouble as it causes us to stand up for justice, defend human rights, say no to violence, discrimination and oppression, as we feed the hungry,

welcome the stranger and include the excluded. 'Don't walk there, because it is full of mines.' Yet millions of people across the world are willing to do just that. Our sisters and brothers in Kyiv are doing it now. In the end we follow this child, and the man he became, because it is what makes us most truly ourselves, more fully human because we have encountered the divine.

There's an anonymous poem that puts it this way:

> The darkest time of the year,
> The poorest place in town,
> Cold, and a taste of fear,
> Man and woman alone.
> What can be hope for here?
> More light than we can learn,
> More wealth than we can treasure,
> More love than we can earn,
> More peace than we can measure,
> Because one child is born.

May I wish you all a happy and blessed Christmas.

Amen.