

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.