

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon – Second Sunday of Advent – 6<sup>th</sup> December 2020**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

I wonder what Babylon means for you. I wonder if there's a place you have ended up in which feels partly of your own making but from which you long to be released. For the people to whom Isaiah wrote those verses in our Old Testament reading (Isaiah 40.1-11), it meant exile and captivity and punishment and shame, dislocation and lament and longing and despair, for fifty years. Perhaps we can relate to some of those feelings this Advent. There's been a bit of Babylon in all of us since March, and it isn't over yet.

Yet suddenly, at the beginning of Chapter 40, Isaiah's hearers are told there is to be redemption and homecoming. Not only that, but the road home is going to be made easy for them – despite it being 800 kilometres of rough and mountainous terrain, 'every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill made low'. And though they are very aware of their human fragility (like grass that withers and fades), they are told that God is coming with strength and will lead them like a shepherd, carrying them if necessary, all the way home. 'Comfort, O comfort my people', says your God. You have served your term. Your penalty is paid.

It's the most beautiful vision. Like a prison door swinging open, freedom restored when you least expected it. 'A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God'. Cut to the opening verses of the first chapter of the first Gospel, Mark, and there they are again: 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'. This, we are told, some six hundred years later, is 'the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God', and that the voice in the wilderness is 'John the baptizer'. The beauty of Isaiah's vision is happening now.

I spoke last week about judgment being an Advent theme. Traditionally in the church this Second Sunday of Advent is the one on which clergy used to be encouraged to preach on judgment, as part of a series of sermons on the 'four last things': death, judgment, heaven and hell. There is more than one way of looking at the four last things. Last Saturday I attended an online retreat for Advent run by the Church Times, which included a talk by Mark Oakley, the priest and author who served in the Diocese some years ago as Archdeacon of Germany and Northern Europe and is now Dean of St John's College, Cambridge. He began his reflection by describing the sense of yearning which characterises Advent, as expressed in the great 'O' antiphons used at evening prayer in the week before Christmas. They each begin with the invocation 'O', reciting the attributes of Christ mentioned in the Scriptures: O Wisdom, O Lord, O Root of Jesse, O Key of David, etc. We sang them last week in our hymn, 'O Come, O Come Emmanuel' – come and be God-with-us again. 'O Come, Key of David' – unlock us, free us.

Mark Oakley suggested that the four last things can be explored in terms of our inner landscape, which in many ways the pandemic has laid bare. 'What is death? What will mine be like? What will come after? And under such pressure, how am I judged as a human being at the moment? What am I like to be with? What happens to other people in my presence? As for heaven and hell, which do I bring people closer to? Which do I live in?'

He noted that Advent is a season of longing and incompleteness, in which our words struggle to contain the hope of the Christian faith and at the same time deal with the confusions and distresses of life and the world. We long to hear the promises again, to find our way back to God. It occurs to me that this is why Advent is often paired with Lent, and why the early church looked on it as a time of penitence as they waited for the coming of Christ. The reason for our sense of yearning is the desire to be at one with God again. The word for that goal of longing is atonement (literally 'at-one-ment'), what theologians refer to as 'the work of Christ'. The closeness to God that was lost in Eden but restored to us in Jesus, who brings us back – brings us home - to God.

Mark Oakley went on to explore how the insights of the psychologist Carl Jung seem particularly relevant for the season of Advent. Jung believed that the human self, as it grows up, learns to fit in, to socialise and to keep people happy – parents, siblings, friends, teachers, bosses. In order to do this, we develop a social self, a mask, a face to present to the world. And the more we put the mask on, then the more we repress other bits of us – emotions, feelings, talents, that are part of who we are but we don't want them seen by others because we have been taught – or taught ourselves - that they are somehow unacceptable.

This can include things like permission to express emotions (tenderness, vulnerability), or to show originality, or to show ignorance, to admit we don't know things. So we become guarded versions of ourselves, with a collection of 'stuff' we carry round with us, getting heavier and heavier. This untouchable part of ourselves becomes hidden, from other people and ourselves. Jung called it the 'shadow', an essential part of us but one that we fail to integrate as part of the whole. He cautioned that it will always emerge, sometimes in unconscious acts, or when we project things – good and bad – onto others. The shadow is everything within us that hasn't been allowed expression, and it can apply to nations, groups and churches as well as individuals. Sometimes we throw onto others the unloved bits of ourselves which we try to hide or remove, and that leads to scapegoating.

Spiritually this is important, because it's about how we relate - to ourselves, to others and to God. If we can learn to integrate our shadow, the bits of us we try to hide from ourselves, we will become better at relating to others - less touchy, less prone to react sharply with people, less distrustful. It's part of learning to love our neighbour as ourselves, not hate our neighbour as ourselves. And that in turn will bring us closer to God. If we aren't trying to hide ourselves from God, like that couple in the garden long ago, we will draw closer to God in honesty and trust. We can start by looking at ourselves more honestly in these weeks leading up to Christmas.

For God in Christ comes to meet us as we are. It's part of the incalculable gift of the Incarnation. We may not feel we can tell him who we are because, if we did, he might not like us. But it was to people like us to whom Christ came, and he met them with love. We can tell him who we are, light and dark, for he is the one who will still accept us after we have told him. The process will not be easy

– Jesus warned that there will be signs of distress, confusion and fear – and we may well need help with it. But Advent is a time of the year when we are encouraged to take it seriously.

I should probably have preached to you a traditional Advent sermon about sin and separation from God and the need for repentance, a turning around. But I wonder if coming to terms with our own shadow doesn't point us in the same direction. Perhaps that's been our Babylon, from which we are being offered a way back. And the way has been prepared, for every hill and valley of the complicated ways in which we separate ourselves from God and our true selves has been removed in Christ. If we listen, we will hear the words we need for the journey: 'Comfort, O comfort my people.'

At this point I might have played you eight minutes from Handel's *Messiah*, in his unforgettable setting of those words. But they have also been encapsulated by the modern poet Michael Dennis Browne, in a setting by Stephen Paulus which Christine found for our Compline service a few weeks ago. It's called *The Road Home*. Let's hear it again now.

Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49Og75MrkV8>

Tell me, where is the road  
I can call my own,  
That I left, that I lost  
So long ago?  
All these years I have wandered,  
Oh when will I know  
There's a way, there's a road  
That will lead me home?

After wind, after rain,  
When the dark is done,  
As I wake from a dream  
In the gold of day,  
Through the air there's a calling  
From far away,  
There's a voice I can hear  
That will lead me home.

Rise up, follow me,  
Come away, is the call,  
With the love in your heart  
As the only song;  
There is no such beauty  
As where you belong;  
Rise up, follow me,  
I will lead you home.