

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Harvest Festival

2nd October 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd James Johnston, Chaplain

Last Wednesday, representatives of different churches in Marseille gathered at the Eglise Saint-Ferréol for an ecumenical service of prayer entitled '*Ecoutez la voix de la création*' ('Listening to the voice of creation'). The service moved from contemplating the creation, through repentance, intercessory prayer and finally a commitment to improving our own treatment of the environment. It is right that such a service should coincide with harvest time, for harvest is a moment like no other when we should stop, reflect, wonder and give thanks for all that we have received.

Harvest is a powerful image, which appears often in the Bible. First, it is designated a time of gratitude. In our reading from Deuteronomy today, part of Moses's farewell speech to the people of Israel just before they enter the promised land, Moses instructs them to offer to God the first fruits of the harvest, setting a basket down before the altar in gratitude for their release from slavery into a land flowing with milk and honey. But it's not just a single act. Living life thankfully is beneficial to us all. If you haven't tried it before, why not begin each day thinking of three things for which you are grateful. I knew a parishioner who, when people asked her how she was, would sometimes reply:

‘not in debt, in prison or in hospital’. There are perhaps more positive formulations one could think of, but there was wisdom in her words. One day, during a time of increased violence in Israel/Palestine, she was admitted to her local accident and emergency department in rural England. On being discharged from the hospital into a snowy night at one o’clock in the morning, she was heard to comment: ‘Thank heaven we’re not in Gaza.’

The point of those stories, and an important reason for keeping Harvest Festival, is that if we can focus more on what we do have rather than on what we don’t, it helps us live less anxious lives. Living thankfully also reminds us of the vital balance that lies both at the heart of creation and in human belonging. The war in Ukraine has made everyone more aware of how much of the world’s grain supply comes from that country. The price of our food partly depends on it. Here in the prosperous countries of the north and west, food security is not something we have often needed to think about before. But it is becoming an urgent problem worldwide. If we could become more aware of our responsibility to those who lack the basics for survival, if we could learn how to care for the planet entrusted to us, then we would learn again the truth that we are interdependent, and at the same time ultimately dependent on God, the creator of all. And then we might begin to live differently.

Harvest in the Bible is also used as an image of our accountability. Whatever your understanding may be of the account we will have to give of ourselves at the end of our earthly lives, consider this: how would you wish to be remembered? The spiritual writer Gerard Hughes used to encourage people to reflect on what they would like said about them at their funeral, and then to

begin to live like that. It is a good way of helping us focus on what is truly important.

In his sermon at the Queen's funeral, the Archbishop of Canterbury noted that people tend not to be remembered for their wealth or ambition but for their service to others. The things they did that were generous, outward looking, considerate, thoughtful towards the people they were with. As he put it: 'Those who serve will be loved and remembered when those who cling to power and privileges are long forgotten.'

Harvest is just as much about giving as about receiving. As our Collect today puts it, 'Eternal God, ... you give us the fruits of the earth in their season: grant that we may use them to your glory, for the relief of those in need and for our own well-being'. At the end of this service, we will be collecting donations for the local charity *Les Restos du Coeur*, helping to provide food for those in need. It is a tiny gesture, but one that matters. We must never turn our backs on those who need our help, even when we don't see how we can realistically make much difference. You probably know the story of the starfish, originally published in an essay by Loren Eiseley in 1969. Two people are walking along a beach onto which hundreds of starfish have been thrown by a storm and are dying because they cannot survive outside the water. From time to time one of the walkers stops, picks up a starfish and throws it into the sea. The other says: 'Why are you doing that? There are hundreds of starfish dying on this beach. You can't possibly make a difference.' The friend replies: 'I can make a difference for this one.'

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus says to his followers: 'I am the bread of life.' The crowd had referred to their foundational faith story of the manna that came from heaven when their ancestors were wandering in the wilderness without food. It is at this point in the Fourth Gospel that Jesus's true significance is disclosed to them. He says to them: 'It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven'. The past tense becomes present: 'I am the bread of life.' The writer of the Gospel is saying: this is it, there is nowhere further to look, it is the end of all our desiring. The mysterious presence of God, which is all we need. Christ is the bread of life, the true manna, the ultimate provision for us.

It has been pointed out that, when hearing the words 'I am the Bread of Life', the early Christian worshippers would have heard an echo of their own eucharistic worship. And so do we. For it is in the Eucharist that we encounter Christ most closely, in bread and wine. The eternal gift that never runs out but is always available to us, at the Lord's table where all are welcome. It is here that we find life. Jesus said, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'

This is the gift which people have encountered in the churches of this chaplaincy for over a hundred years. Let us pray that they may continue to do so for many years to come.

Amen.