

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Sermon

6th November 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd James Johnston, Chaplain

Some of the most memorable sayings of Jesus were given in response to someone stopping him as he went about his ministry and asking him a question. The best known of these is the reply he gives when he is asked: 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' It is worth recalling that there were six hundred and thirteen commandments in the Law of Moses. Jesus replies: 'Love God and love your neighbour. Everything else flows from these.' A reply as beautiful as it is simple.

Often the question asked of Jesus was about an issue that was causing controversy in religious circles at the time. One example is the conversation recounted in Matthew's Gospel when Jesus was asked: 'Can a man divorce his wife for any reason?' Reading that conversation out of context, as a blanket ban against divorce in all circumstances, still causes much misunderstanding and pain, sometimes leaving Christians feeling trapped in loveless or abusive marriages. Recent research has focussed more on the fact that, in Jesus's time, there was a debate going on over whether the matrimonial laws should be extended to allow a man to divorce his wife for any reason he liked, as opposed to being limited to the reasons permitted under the law of Moses. One of the

arguments against the change was that allowing men to divorce for ‘any reason’ would make women more vulnerable, at a time when they had no economic or social security. It was a live debate, and it seems that the question Jesus was actually being asked in Matthew’s Gospel was: ‘Teacher, which side of the debate are you on?’

Another example of a question like this occurs in our Gospel reading this morning. The idea of an afterlife had come into the Jewish tradition quite late – around 170 BC – and not all the Jewish authorities agreed with it. At the time Jesus was teaching, both the Pharisees and those Jews who had been influenced by the Greeks did believe in an afterlife, though they had different understandings about how it worked. The more traditional Sadducees, on the other hand, did not believe in an afterlife at all. They did not accept the validity of any scriptures outside the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), whereas the idea of resurrection appeared in later writings. So the Sadducees were essentially asking Jesus: ‘Teacher, which side of the debate are you on?’, though they angled the question in such a way as to suggest: ‘Surely the whole notion of resurrection is ridiculous?’

In his reply, Jesus takes them back to the time of Moses (to a saying that was in the Torah) and points out that they will find language there which does allow for the notion of life beyond death. He dismisses their exaggerated, literalist example of what resurrection might be like, presenting instead a vision of heaven which is very different from our present world - expansive, filled with the primacy of life over death and the beautiful sense of God’s eternal love for his children. It is hard for us, as it was for the Sadducees, to understand how things will be when we die. Yet the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel are simple

and direct. He tells us that God is God of the living and the dead: all are alive to him. The implication is that our life will continue, but in a different and transfigured form.

It's worth bearing in mind that Jesus never expressed anxiety about the long term destiny of the disciples he loved. He assumed that their relationship with him would continue beyond death. That is our hope too, as disciples of Christ.

It is, I believe, consoling for those of us who have lost loved ones to be reminded that all are alive for God - our God and theirs. What separates us from our loved ones is our limited human vision and understanding, not God's. That should give us comfort and courage.

As Christians who try to live accordingly, we are already living the life of God. And this life in Christ which we enjoy now, we shall also share with those who have gone before us. Death is an ending of this life before we move into that other dimension where the fullness of God will be made known to us. That is why we are resurrection people and our song is hope.

November is a month of remembrance. Last Sunday we celebrated All Saints' Day, and in our service of Compline on Wednesday we marked All Souls' Day, remembering loved ones we see no longer. In a week's time we will fold into our remembrance those who have died on the field of battle – an act of corporate remembrance.

In remembering those who have gone before us, we are reminded too of our own mortality. In response to a number of requests here in Marseille, next

Saturday we will be holding a session in church about how to plan our funeral. Taking a leaf from Her late Majesty's book, the session will be called 'London Bridge for All'. Planning our funeral is a thing we all ought to consider doing, not least because it will help those whom we love most to take decisions when the time comes, confident in the knowledge they are doing something we would have wanted.

This season of remembrance reminds us that the one thing of which we can all be certain is that we shall die. And as we contemplate that, at these church services we hear again, in one form or another, the words of Christ that confront the certainty of our dissolution: 'I am the resurrection and I am life.' We come back to the scriptures to hear those words, not because we hope to escape the reality of death or to deny its finality. Christians are not, as the sceptics suppose, wishful thinkers or deniers of the real world. If we were, we would not have as our emblem the Cross, a symbol of death.

At the heart of our faith is the story of a man who died; and of a man who died believing in the power of God to confront, redeem and transform that most intractable of human limitations. And so we come to hear again the words of Jesus: 'I am the resurrection and I am life; whoever believes in me shall never die', because they suggest to us something we have already experienced in our own lives, well before their earthly end.

Those encounters with death and resurrection, which punctuate our lives, we bring to God in this Eucharist. And as we come to the altar, we will lift up our empty hands, holding them out to God, who brings all things together, and who

comes to us with his very self. And as we receive the wafer into our outstretched hands, we will become what we receive: the Body of Christ.

Sometimes that wafer is traced with the sign of the Cross. A reminder that although our emblem is a symbol of death, it was also transfigured, once and for all, in the early light of dawn on the first Easter Day.

Amen.