

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Reflection – Third Sunday of Lent – 7<sup>th</sup> March 2021**

*Jane Quarmby, Reader*

Over the past year we have all had to adapt to a strange new world, one stalked by the spectre of a disease we are struggling to combat, which has made us prisoners in our own homes. An invisible but deadly little microbe, which has killed more people in America than in all the 20<sup>th</sup> century wars it has fought in, has turned our lives upside down in many ways which we never anticipated. We have all had to change our outlook, our way of living, our interaction with others, our nonchalant travelling here, there and everywhere on cheap transport, how we shop – and how we worship. With the closure of many churches, we have had to adapt to technology, to worship at home. This has brought some benefits – for example, our zoom congregation last week was double our usual Sunday congregation and more and more people are joining us. To our surprise, our acts of worship on a Sunday and a Wednesday have faithful followings of far more people than ever made it to our church buildings in Marseille, Aix or Oppède on a normal day.

It has also brought with it, for many, considerable hardship, loss and grief, illness and loneliness. But perhaps as a result of that, more and more people are turning to online worship. It's in our dark days that we need the support and love of a family, of the promise of hope and reassurance. Our chaplaincy is now regarded as a lifeline for those who whilst really needing a proper hug, are nevertheless getting a virtual hug from the interaction made possible on our screens with people we know or are getting to know and make friends with. We are “doing” church at home, and becoming a more close-knit family in the process.

It has not been an easy move to worshipping at home for many of us – we like the atmosphere of a church, a place where people have prayed, for centuries in some

places. We miss the social side, and the physical communion. For some, travelling a long way, it used to be a day out once a month.

On the plus side, I have really enjoyed the times when some of us out here in the boondocks have got together in small groups to share the eucharist and have lunch together afterwards. Those times were special and I look forward to starting them again soon – not least for the bonding that goes on over a good lunch and a glass of wine or two.

Jesus too seems to have enjoyed sharing meals with friends and colleagues too – and in many cases, those who wouldn't be welcomed by polite society. So it was with interest that I saw that he did have an angry streak in him – in today's Gospel from John, we read about him losing his temper to all intents and purposes and cleansing the temple of the money lenders, the traders, the animals, driving them out. Strong words and strong actions – normally we read of him “driving out” demons, not inoffensive cattle and sheep. For one man to drive all those people and animals out must have taken some real passion and anger. He would have been to the temple many times, but this is the one time we hear about him taking such grave exception to what went on there. And it's interesting that John is the only Gospel writer who puts this account at the beginning of his Gospel – the others put it at the end, providing a strong hint of why the chief priests wanted to get rid of him – he was too much trouble and was shining a spotlight on their little fiefdom.

For the temple was literally the centre of Jewish life – religious, social and economic. But it had changed over the years, and was now, along with the teachings of the chief priests, no longer fit for purpose in the eyes of Jesus. Claire Amos, in her blog this week, puts it better than I can:

“ his actions.... suggest that what he was doing was declaring the Temple “redundant”. A hint to this lies in the detail of the target of Jesus' physical actions. In John's Gospel, as well as the money-changers and the human beings who are selling and buying, Jesus drives out the sheep and the cattle and the doves. In other words, Jesus “drove out” the animals that were essential for the Temple's sacrificial cult. ... It wasn't simply that he was opposing the corruption of those who sought to make a living by selling “Holy Hamburgers” as over priced snacks to poor pilgrims, but he was challenging the Temple's very raison d'être.”

So why wasn't this Temple needed any more?

Earlier in John's Gospel he says "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us". There is no longer any need for the Temple traders changing pagan money into holy money, supplying so called clean animals to sacrifice – there's no longer any need to sacrifice the animals either – Jesus is the sacrifice who will give up his life to make all of his creation holy once more. Christ changed everything through his death and resurrection – he is now the temple, the head of the church and we Christians are his body. It's his followers, his community, who are the church, not a building in which we meet and follow rituals.

So, coming to the present day, over the past year we've had to relook at what it means to be a church. As Claire puts it, 'We have all had a bit of a crash course in the New Testament understanding that "Church" primarily refers to the "Christian Community" rather than the building that in normal times is the place where we meet. We are, it seems, at a real turning point in the life of our church, where we are faced with the prospect of being "churches without walls". It's a point of tension for us all – but also of hope and a new way of looking at what it means to be Christian.'

Perhaps it's chance to listen to what God wants from us - the Ten Commandments outlined in Exodus specify how we are to relate to God and each other. They still give us a good blueprint for daily life but, everywhere we look, those commandments are being broken. No other God but me – do people worship other things now instead? Don't make any idols or worship them – again, do people worship money and goods instead? Don't misuse God's name – I lose count of how many people do just that all the time. Don't work on the Sabbath – shops are open, transport runs, we do our shopping online, catch up on jobs - forgetting it's not us that will supply our needs but God. Honour your parents – recognise that you are not self sufficient because a bit of humility and gratitude go a long way. Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't tell lies about your neighbour, don't covet anything your neighbour has. When I was little, I thought this referred to our actual neighbours next door but of course it refers to everyone around us. Possessions don't bring happiness any more than we nowadays think sacrificing a white sheep on the steps of the altar will absolve us of our wrongdoing.

But there's a lot of sense in those Ten Commandments and they too are a challenge to us when we think about what it means to be church – with or without walls, whether we go to a special building to worship or feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in our kitchen at home. As life rolls gently on, amid the uncertainty of this grim time for all of us, I am heartened to remember that Jesus is always with me, whether I am praying to him in a chapel, a cathedral, at my desk or kitchen table. He is the one constant in my life – and I hope, in yours too. He's not confined by walls – perhaps we shouldn't be either? As Easter approaches in four weeks' time, perhaps our Lent vow should be to let Him into every aspect of our lives, regardless of where we are or what we are doing.

Amen.