

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

Sermon – All Saints' Marseille

8th Sunday after Trinity – 5th August 2022

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

“Tell me, how could we cope with all the worries that come upon us every day?” asked a schoolfriend the other day. “Pandemic, war in Ukraine, inflation, gas and electricity bills that people can’t pay, global rise of populism, environmental disasters on an unprecedented scale...” I didn’t exhort her: “Don’t be afraid.” Nor did I suggest: “Come out, look at the heavens and count the stars.” She might have found my invitation pointless – after all, in a big city, one can barely see no more than just a few stars – and rather surprising and unhelpful.

Yet this invitation addressed to Abraham certainly resonates with me.

I am a child of the Space Race era, the time when the Soviet Union and the United States were competing in the exploration and control of outer space. Yuri Gagarin’s first journey into space happened before I was born – but I watched the live broadcast of Neil Armstrong’s first steps on the Moon. I nourished dreams of navigating the universe in a spaceship, of boldly going where no one has gone before and counting the stars.

Those were not only daring, but also liberating dreams for those who lived, like me, under a political regime whose promises for a flourishing future we did not trust and which drastically limited and controlled the lives of ordinary people through a climate of fear. Our horizons shrunk more and more.

Nowadays, for many people, a broad spectrum of worries, fears, anxieties are a permanent condition. Over-anxiety is very much a problem of our time, as Jamie pointed out last Sunday – yet there is nothing new under the sun.

Abraham's story was one of exhaustion from warfare, of insecure life in the wilderness, of childlessness, of no future to live for.

The community to whom the letter to the Hebrews was written were weary of suffering (public ridicule, confiscation of property, imprisonment) and disheartened by the delay in the coming of the Lord to confirm their belief.

One of the Desert Fathers, Makarios of Egypt, wrote in the 5th century: "I am convinced that not even the apostles, although filled with the Holy Spirit, were completely free from anxiety. The advent of grace does not mean the immediate deliverance from anxiety."

What about us? Like Abraham, we may know of anxieties over conflicts, insecurity, fruitless life, and lack of horizon. We may need to be reminded that there is light and beauty and peace outside our fears, beyond the very close horizon of a life with many limitations.

Fear dominates, it closes down all else. Horizons shrink, we can only see what is immediately in front of us. It is hard enough to live with fear in the short term – how to cope with it in the long haul?

God responded to Abraham's fears with an invitation that contained a promise: "Don't be afraid. Come out, look at the heavens and count the stars." Could star-counting soothe one's deepest fears?

Little did Abraham know that the 6000 stars or so that are visible on a clear night in the wilderness were only the tiniest fraction of the estimated 200 billion trillion stars in the universe. Nevertheless, the starry sky spoke to him of the countless blessings yielded by God's promise.

While we, people of the 21st century, choose to entrust our future to science, technology, pension schemes, Abraham wasn't afraid, to paraphrase Corrie ten Boom, to entrust an unknown future to the God he knew, whose voice had called him to step out of his fears. That is what the author of the letter to the Hebrews calls faith, "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen".

Faith helped Abraham to live in impermanent, fragile, and insecure earthly dwellings – and yet to move forward into a future beyond the promised land,

towards the city with foundations not made by hand, whose architect and builder is God.

We too are people who have been promised a dwelling in this city – we are heirs of the same promise made to Abraham. Therefore, says Jesus Christ, we should not be afraid, for it is our Father’s good pleasure to give us the Kingdom, that is, the future built upon the foundations of God’s love, mercy, and goodness. Jesus Christ is the first fruit of that future, the first of those living fully a resurrected life, a life of love and meaning and peace beyond death.

At the darkest times of our lives, when our horizons crowd in, leaving no room to breathe or move, we should go out and consider the stars, lights in the darkness of our fear, glimpses of hope, reminders that it is not fear that holds the earth and the universe on course.

Be not afraid! The lostness we see all around us and within us is not the last truth about the world and about ourselves. Faith should help us to see, beneath appearances, the truth that holds the Universe on its course: the truth of God’s love, and of God’s peace.

Step out in faith, accept the invitation to live and journey within God’s promise, as the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke once said: “Believe in a love that is being stored up for you like an inheritance, and have faith that in this love there is a strength and a blessing so large that you can travel as far as you wish without having to step outside it.” (*Letters to a Young Poet*)

God’s promises lead to freedom, if we consent to them: freedom to leave anxiety behind; freedom to have confidence about a future secured not by human endeavour but by God alone; freedom to find fulfilment not in earthly possessions but rather in our relationship with God; freedom to boldly go where no one has gone before and count the stars – that is, God’s blessings. And also the freedom to generously make real for others God’s promises: the promise of freedom in the midst of oppression and tyranny; the promise of plenty and peace in the midst of hunger and war; the promise of joy and loyalty in the midst of fear and betrayal; the promise of hope in the midst of despair.

Let us, in faith, always hold onto God's promise of love and life in the midst of hatred and death, of salvation and renewal in the midst of sin and decay – that is, onto the promise of the living Christ.

“Let your loving-kindness, O Lord, be upon us, as we have set our hope on you.” (Ps 33.22)

Amen.