

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 17th Sunday after Trinity

9th October 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

Geography matters in our lives. It matters where we are born, it matters where we live and work. Nowadays, whether we use a real map or an app on our phones, we can easily become familiar with our surroundings, and find our way. The days when maps had blank spaces corresponding to uncharted territories – which one had better not enter - are long gone: satellites and Google have made the earth visible in the smallest detail; borders are clearly defined and sometimes made visible. Borders have not only a geographical meaning. They are set up to distinguish places that are safe from the unsafe ones, to distinguish us from them, what is ours from what is theirs. And, as we know, they can be transformed into iron curtains.

But less visible on maps and phones, there still exist borderlands, in-between zones, where rules escape control, one does not know what can happen. There are paths that take you in but won't take you out. Such borderlands are often inhabited by people who live on the margins of society, invisible or untouchable because of who or what they are, or where they come from.

Have you ever found yourself caught in an in-between zone? An airport transit zone, for example: when one enters it, there's uncertainty about catching the connecting flight and retrieving luggage or documents, and about how the immediate journey or indeed one's life will unfold. Here one's identity is scrutinized, the right to enter a certain territory is questioned, one might even receive a stamp reading 'you are trapped here'. This is, more or less, the true story of an Iranian refugee who lived in the transit area of Terminal 1 at the Paris-Charles de Gaulle airport from 1988 until 2006. He is stateless to this day, but at least he is allowed to live in a shelter in Paris.

An in-between zone cannot only be a place of uncertainty, but a place of danger and anguish as well, with little hope that cries of distress may be answered. A year ago, an inflatable dinghy carrying 30 migrants from France to the United Kingdom capsized in the English Channel, and 27 people drowned, four women and two children among them. They had called the French police for help, when their boat began to deflate, but were told they were in British waters, so they called the British police, but no one came to rescue. The victims were Kurdish, Afghan, Ethiopians, Somali, Vietnamese, Egyptian. They were caught in an in-between zone. Geography matters. They didn't belong. Unwanted, despised, rejected. Does this mean they didn't deserve to be saved?

Geography matters also in Luke's Gospel. There is the broader geography of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, the city where meaning and power are concentrated, the place where Christ will be crucified. The more detailed geography of today's reading is that of a borderland that is neither Samaria nor Galilee.

Here the borders not only separate Galilean from Samaritan, once members of the same family of tribes, but also separate one worship tradition from another; what is declared to be pure from what has been defined as impure; friend from foe.

Jesus is on the way to the cross and in this in-between zone ten men with a skin disease, a leprous condition, keeping their distance - as they were obliged to do - cry out to him for mercy. They not only live in a geographical borderland, but also in one of social, religious, and physical uncleanness. In this face-to-face encounter with Christ, they are, for the first time in years, seen and heard, they exist as human beings, and they obtain complete healing. Only one of them will come back to praise God and thank Jesus for his cleansing.

'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?', Jesus asks rhetorically.

Christ's followers have reason to be bewildered. Did the Samaritan really deserve to be cured? Isn't God's mercy reserved for his people? After all, there is a centuries-long history of religious rivalry and ethnic friction between Jews and Samaritans.

If we have listened carefully to Luke's Gospel this year, the healing of the Samaritan shouldn't come as a surprise to us. In Luke's Gospel there is a leitmotif of reversal, which Mary had announced, and Jesus himself had proclaimed at the beginning of his ministry. At Nazareth, through the story of the cleansing of the Syrian general Naaman, Jesus reminded his listeners that God's grace and mercy has never been reserved for Israel (Luke 4:27). This was a story that challenged people in their understanding of who is worthy, and who can claim healing in the name of God. In response, his townspeople drove Jesus out of town and tried to throw him over a cliff (Luke 4:30). It can be difficult to accept the welcoming ways of our God, who encroaches on our borders. The healing of Naaman and of the Samaritan is a reminder that God's promises know no boundaries or borders, that God's grace will not abide by the arbitrary lines we draw between one another. Christ is the border-crosser par excellence and, in so doing, he witnesses to his Father's attention to those whom others consider to be on the margins.

With Christ's arrival, the geography of the borderland between Galilee and Samaria is transformed: the in-between zone becomes a sacred space where God's reversal law is at work. Here God shows up in healing and liberative power. Here it's the geography of God's kingdom which matters.

The maps of this geography are to be read, as the Samaritan demonstrates, with eyes of faith and with gratitude.

Faith doesn't mean "belief", adhering to a certain set of doctrines about God. Faith means "trust." Trust in God's reality and presence. Faith is placing one's trust in God's lovingkindness, regardless of one's personal circumstances. Faith leads one on paths that are cut across ambiguities and uncertainties.

Gratitude is a way of living and acting that never forgets one's dependence on God's grace. It is the basic human answer to God, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth once said, not fear and trembling, not guilt and dread. This is particularly difficult in our largely secularised society, which encourages us to believe that, to a large extent, we have ourselves to thank for what and where we are today, that there is always more in the world to be acquired or accomplished, and that we can have faith only in our hard work, clever investments, and wise choices. Yet, gratitude is not an inborn trait, it should be learned and then exercised, like a muscle. Gratitude begets more gratitude.

Gratitude and faith can unlock the fullness of life, can turn what we have into enough, can push us into those in-between places in the world - and in our lives - where there is brokenness, pain, and rejection, and can help us to read on God's map, as the Syrian Naaman and the Samaritan did, the paths of cleansing, of healing, of restoration.

Walking on those paths will move us forward into God's future with the assurance that there is always more to God's story with us than we can ever imagine or hope for. For that, may we always give thanks and praise.

Amen.