

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 13th Sunday after Trinity

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All Saints' Marseille

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The Pharisees and scribes grumble, 'This fellow welcomes sinners!' Isn't this outrageous? Surely, Jesus knows that all that is unclean should not be approached, lest one gets contaminated by uncleanness. Surely, he has learned that some people are not acceptable company. They are a lost cause. There is no need to try to retrieve the lost ones – there is no place for them in God's Book of Life.

Today, we find Jesus in truly mixed company. It is not the first time, not the last time either. He was in mixed company at his birth in the stable, visited by shepherds and wise men alike. He will be in mixed company even in his last hour, on the cross, with one criminal on his right and another one on his left, while, at the foot of the cross, self-righteous people watch and comment.

Let us not be very swift to judge the Pharisees and scribes and their insistence on rules and regulations about who belongs and who does not – after all, our own Christian tradition has established rules about belonging, about who can be 'in' and who cannot. These rules match what we believe about God. Yet how can we know what God believes about us and whose name he wants to write in his Book?

Once again, Jesus tries, by means of parables, to give us a glimpse of how things work in God's kingdom.

One cannot fail to recognise that, very often, Jesus' parables start with life as lived. A sower scattering seeds in the field, visitors arriving at a late hour who need to be fed, children who are not very eager to help with domestic chores. Familiar situations that develop in a surprising way. This morning also, there is

something familiar about a lost sheep and a lost coin - or lost property, in general. Lost by accident, by inattention, through our own fault, or through life circumstances.

Yet, it is not only physical items that we might lose – there might also be parts of ourselves. Dreams, hopes, friendships, enthusiasm, joy ... It is not easy to retrieve them. Sometimes we feel as if we have lost our entire self: in grief, anxiety, anger, guilt, disappointment, regrets ... We feel lost when the circumstances of life overwhelm us.

And what about the heart-rending, unquenchable sense of loss when someone who deeply matters for us is no more?

Today marks in the US the tragic anniversary of the 9/11 attacks when 3000 lives were lost. Today, and in the days to come, millions across UK and countless people around the world will mourn the loss of Queen Elizabeth and pay tribute to her life of steadfast and selfless service to the good of her people, and to her witness of faith in Jesus Christ. Today we are reminded that, in this life, some things that are lost cannot be got back. We are left bereft and yearning.

Some things that are lost cannot be replaced, either. In our Western world, so much is disposable and temporary. Everything from tissues to relationships. When an item is lost, before setting on searching, we may want to consider if a search is worthwhile. Who in their right mind, in our efficiency driven world, is prepared to invest considerable time and energy to retrieve one sheep out of one hundred? One per cent losses are perfectly acceptable. Next year, in spring, there will be plenty of lambs to choose from, anyway.

Your ways are not God's ways, says Jesus. God will not say, 'Oh well, ninety-nine out of one hundred is good enough.' In costly love God embraces all humanity. He suffers none to be lost, yet pursues every wandering lamb, frantically searches for every lost coin. He even descends into the valley of death to bring into his light and peace those we mourn. When the lost turn back, God's heart is glad, and he fosters celebration.

No one is expendable for God, Jesus says. Each one of us is of great worth: worth searching for, worth finding, and worth celebrating.

For God each one of us is unique, priceless, and irreplaceable. The neighbour you have known for years, the stranger on the street, the migrant in search of a better life – they too are unique, priceless, and irreplaceable.

God loves us with all our weaknesses, with all our inherited and acquired defects, with all our failures. He loves us just as we are.

Yet there is something else that lies at the heart of the parables we read this morning: it is God's longing for completeness, wholeness, and union, which causes him to search. When one of the sheep is lost, completeness, wholeness, and union are lost. The ninety-nine sheep are incomplete. When one coin is misplaced, the other nine do not have the same value.

Let us also listen to God's invitation to share in his longing and in his search for that which is lost: 'Go after the one that is lost until you find them.' This is an invitation to share with hope in the abundance of his love for humankind.

Queen Elizabeth has heard this call and, through her faith, has shared in God's love for humankind. Hers is a huge legacy to build upon: her insistence that every person deserves to be treated with dignity, and that the rights and freedoms of those who are marginalised, vulnerable or disadvantaged are to be protected and respected, as they are all bearers, with us, of God's indelible imprint. No one should be misplaced like a coin, forgotten like a stray sheep. No one should be considered a lost cause. The Queen was right to say that "on our own, we cannot wipe out injustices", but together, through "thousands of small acts of goodness" we can have, with God's help, a "bigger impact than we imagine." Together, we can work toward the wholeness which is God's will.

The Queen's dedication was rooted in the trust that the Shepherd will always go to find the sheep. For 'neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8.38-39).

We have heard in today's gospel an invitation to wholeness and abundance of life, which we also call salvation. No one is beyond the reach of God's love and grace. All are invited to the table. We will be carried home to the rejoicing of the heavens. That is the reality and the foolishness of divine love. Everyone matters. Everyone belongs.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.