

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 3rd Sunday of Advent – 13th December 2020

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A few years ago, I spent three days at a Bishops' Advisory Panel – the final step in the selection process in the Church of England. This is where candidates participate in a quick succession of interviews, presentations, discussions, and a personal inventory, at the end of which they are recommended (or not) for ministry training. I remember only one question in the personal inventory: What epitaph do you want to have engraved on your tombstone? One really wanted to say something meaningful or at least clever, as answers were meant to provide some material for discussion with the advisors, who were there to ask, again and again: "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

I couldn't offer them much: my name will suffice, I answered. There is no tradition of elaborate epitaphs in Romania. Most graves only have a plain wood cross.

What would John have offered, given the chance to choose his epitaph? 'I am not the Messiah. Neither am I Elijah. Nor the prophet.' The Jerusalem high priests' advisory panel would have found the answer rather unsatisfactory. John does not bring proof of his calling, he keeps pointing to Another. "Among you stands One whom you do not know."

And who are we? What do we say about ourselves? How would we define our identity as a church? What drives us to act as a community? What is our calling? Are we always aware of the One who stands among us?

Perhaps this Sunday's readings can provide a little help to discern our calling. This is one of the few instances when the readings are not only related, but they dialogue, they even seem to be in a polyphony: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord", says Isaiah. "Our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy", says the psalmist. "Rejoice always", writes the Apostle Paul to the Thessalonians. This is Gaudete Sunday. Time to rejoice!

Is John the Baptist's voice dissonant, do you think? One can hardly imagine a dishevelled prophet, coming out of the wilderness only to cry: 'Repent!', as wanting to encourage people to rejoice. Reputedly, a prophet is a killjoy. That is, anyway, what king Herod and his wife Herodias thought about John the Baptist and, consequently, had him put in prison and executed.

But no, John's voice is in tune with the other voices we heard this morning. He sings of renewal, of joy that comes through the light which enlightens everyone.

Isaiah addressed people on their return from exile, who wanted to rebuild all that had been destroyed. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, who had suffered loss and were about to lose the hope to see the Parousia, that is, the Son of Man coming in his kingdom, with their own eyes. John gave testimony before officials who had been sent to ask him to prove his credentials as a potential Messiah candidate. One can sense the expectancy, the hope, the dreams ...

What do we hope for, by the way, what are our dreams, as a church?

You might have recognized the first verses from the prophet Isaiah as the scripture passage that Jesus reads at the beginning of his public ministry: on a Sabbath, at the synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown, opening the scroll, he finds the place where it was written: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' Then he began to say to them: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."¹

Who are the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed? Is this about restoration and reversal for those who are economically deprived and socially oppressed? Yes, it is. At the same time, it speaks to our lives as well.

Yes, we are captive. Yes, we may know the captivity of guilt, of anger, of addiction, of betrayals, of dysfunctional relationships, of consumerism. We might be in the prison of boredom, of uncertainty, of fear for the future, of fear of death. The darkness that needs to be dispelled can be in you and me.

It is you and I who are the poor. I am impoverished, not on account of my unfulfilled wishes, but in my vulnerability, in my lack of tolerance, compassion, willingness to forgive ...

I am often blind to the gift of life and to the blessings so abundantly given to me; and also to the suffering of those near and far, and to God's work in their lives.

As Jesus says, the scripture is fulfilled in our hearing only when we receive it, by recognizing our truth, who we really are. Some need to encounter Christ in an experience of God's forgiveness and healing; some will know Him in an experience of God's comfort and care, through our providing for those in need.

¹ Luke 4.14-21

Can we truly and deeply rejoice on this Gaudete Sunday of the year 2020? A year when mouths have been full not of laughter, but of sorrow. A year that has dimmed the lives of so many.

Winter's dark and cold have taken possession of our days. Likewise, fears and an utter sense of loss encroach on us. We have pretty much exhausted our resources. We have been exiled to a strange and hostile land and we long to return to a place where struggle and oppression are no more. We yearn for something new.

We are Advent people, we are an Advent church, 'still waiting for the One to come in revealed splendour of absolute divinity along with the eternal kingdom'.² In a few moments, we will all unite our voices to express our longing: "He shall come again in glory" and "Thy kingdom come".

Just like the church in Thessalonica, we still have to learn how to live in a time of expectancy. Paul makes it clear that waiting is not something passive, it is a time of preparation, of continual conversion, continual change of heart. This waiting is a time for growing in faith, and a time for celebrating God's goodness. A time for "rejoicing, praying without ceasing, giving thanks in all circumstances". A time to acknowledge God's longing to heal the broken human condition – not only by accepting to be recipients of His reconciling love that leads to Jesus Christ's birth, but also to be bearers of that love in our time and place.

How are we pointing to the Light that dispels every darkness? What are we saying and doing that helps to raise up the downtrodden? How are we working with God to bring about justice, peace and healing? To set prisoners free ? However imperfect I may be, whatever my unfaithfulness to God, my mistakes, my sins, I am invited to testify to the Light with joy.

Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day. It comes from the knowledge that God is faithful to us. Among us stands One we do not know. One who understands and shares our silence and tears, our darkness and struggle. Do we hear Him calling us from hopelessness into hope, from joylessness into joy? Calling us to be the change we seek in the world, to embody the dream we've been waiting for? There is still so much in us that is not ready to receive Him.

Ours is a God of restoration, reversal and renewal. Therefore, rejoice, pray, give thanks. We must be children, women and men of joy and of hope, in this time and this place, as imperfect and frustrating as this time and this place may be.

The One who calls us is faithful.

² Karl Rahner, *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life*

