

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection

1st Sunday after Trinity - 14th June 2020

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This week my French group looked at an article about a young Parisian couple. Two years ago they decided they'd had enough of their lives - the French call it "metro-boulot-dodo": the daily grind of commute-work-bed. 'Our youth was passing us by', they said. So they gave up their jobs and set off on a 10,000 km trek across Europe, from Portugal to the Bosphorus, en route crossing some of the highest mountains of Europe. They called their adventure "2PVA: Deux pas vers l'autre" - or "Two steps towards the other".

As I looked through today's Gospel reading, I was struck by the many similarities between their journey and that of the men commissioned by Jesus: young people, turning their backs on their old lives, facing an exciting, risky future. People in search of encounters with others. Of course, there are big differences too. The disciples were to take far less with them than the young couple. They wouldn't be going to such remote places: Jesus directed his apostles specifically to seek out towns and villages where they would find "the lost sheep of the house of Israel". They were given a clear mission: to bring healing and to proclaim the good news.

This past few weeks have hardly been packed with good news. Just as the Coronavirus epidemic seemed to be loosening its grip here in Europe, we began to hear about its devastating impact in other countries. And then on 25th May came the news of the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Held down for 8 minutes and 46 seconds as a white policeman knelt on his neck, he repeatedly pleaded, "I can't breathe". We joined hundreds of people from across the diocese for an online service on Friday. We waited in silent prayer for those 8 minutes and 46 seconds. It was a long time. I wondered what it took to do that, what it took for the officers to look on as that man's life drained away.

What happened subsequently, the explosion of fury followed by worldwide protest, is hardly surprising, but what we could do this morning is to think about what our readings say about how we, the Christian community, should respond.

"Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do." Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord". What had the Israelites promised? God had said: *"If you **obey my voice and keep my covenant**, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples"*. In his commentary on Exodus, Walter Houston explains: "This solemn imposition of requirements and undertaking of obedience is what this part of the book means by 'covenant'". The relationship between God and his people is "above all a moral one - not a matter of morals in a narrow sense, but based on how God and people behave toward one another".

St Paul often wrote about the difference between following the letter of the Law and following Christ. Jesus himself had no time for those who comply with all the outward

demands of religion whilst denying God in their hearts. He called them, “whited sepulchres” - like clean and whitewashed tombs on the outside but rotten within. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul also reflects on the relationship between God and humanity, but he talks about a new covenant. Through the Cross we have “*peace with God*” and “*access to this grace in which we stand*”. That peace and grace come with responsibilities.

On Tuesday, David and I watched George Floyd’s funeral service. The preacher, The Revd Al Sharpton, pulled no punches about what Christians should be doing when injustice is staring them in the face. His text was from Ephesians 6: “*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*”.

Another speaker, a white pastor from the Southern Baptist Church, remarked that his congregations “have way to go” in terms of standing up to racism and other forms of social injustice that prevent people from being what God intends. Because our faith is not a simple matter of a comfortable private relationship with God. Private prayer and public worship are fine - but where do they take us? We’re commanded to love our neighbours as ourselves. An expert in the law asked Jesus to tell him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responded with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. He made it clear who our neighbour is. He also showed how easy it is for people like the priest who passed by on the other side - those who call themselves religious - to ignore the central tenets of their faith. There is much evil and *present darkness* in our world. It is our duty as Christians to speak out when we see injustice. Silence is complicity. We need to call out wrong where we see it - racism, privilege that exploits the weak, reckless behaviour that destroys the world given for all of us. ... all, in fact, that stands in opposition to the goodness of God. “*Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?*”, asks Jesus. The lawyer replies, “*The one who had mercy on him.*” Jesus told him, “*Go and do likewise.*”

We in the Church have been given a mission: to “*proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.”* Those first apostles had no written gospels; in fact, when Jesus was talking to them, they did not yet know the good news of the resurrection. But there was good news already: in the person of Jesus, God’s kingdom was already near. Proclaiming the good news is so much more than teaching people about the Bible and what we do in church. It’s about our relationship with a God who cares for his creation, who finds it good, who wants us to do justice, show mercy, pray like Jesus, that ‘*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*’.

Jesus had compassion for the crowds “because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”. There are many like that today, people in need of good news about a better way of being. Christ expects us to continue his work: we are, as St Teresa said, his only hands and feet in the world today.

That young couple had a wonderful adventure - but it came to an end when they reached the Bosphorus. Our journey with Christ has no end, but like theirs it will be full of challenges and risks. “*Sheep into the midst of wolves*”, we need to “*be wise as serpents and innocent as*

doves". Above all we must be faithful to our part of God's bargain in proclaiming the good news - that the gospel is for all people and for all time. We don't set out with rucksacks and camping kits, but on our way we do need to put on the armour of God. Unless we're careful, those *wiles* of the enemy that St Paul talked about can be comfort and complacency, insufficient care for those whom our action could help.

Many of us live very privileged lives, but let us never forget that all that we have comes not from us, but from God. As we take our own 'Deux pas vers l'autre' - 'Two steps towards the other', let's keep in mind the words of today's Collect:

"because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do no good thing without you, grant us the help of your grace, that in the keeping of your commandments we may please you both in will and deed".

Amen