

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 2nd Sunday after Trinity – 21st June 2020

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It's a day of mixed emotions. Today we are holding the first service at All Saints since the lockdown began. It is a cause for celebration, but somehow a muted one. We are back in church, but we are wearing face masks, surgical gloves, not singing and everyone is standing two metres apart. This is not back to normal by any means. We are constantly reminded that the coronavirus has not gone away, though it appears to be in retreat enough to allow this limited contact. We have longed for community, since community is what humans are made for. The story of salvation in the Scriptures contains the early observation that it is 'not good for the man to be alone' (Genesis 2.18) and it ends in a city of incomparable beauty, filled with people celebrating: the new Jerusalem, about which we will hear in our anthem this morning, a setting of words from the Book of Revelation. It is a beautiful vision, where death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more. A vision of the heaven which our souls somehow know to be their true home. It reminds us that today's homecoming to our building is but a stage along the way of our pilgrimage.

There are many reasons why today's emotions are mixed. A few weeks ago we marked the 75th anniversary of the ending of the Second World War in Europe. Familiar scenes from newsreels were shown of people hugging each other in the streets and climbing lamp-posts in excitement. But it was pointed out that those pictures only told part of the story. There's a scene in my favourite French film that captures this painfully well.

The film is called *Les Uns et Les Autres*, made by Claude Lelouch in 1981. It tells the story of four families with intertwining destinies, and the impact on each family of the Second World War. The scene that has stayed with me is the moment when a soldier returns home at the end of the conflict. He has to walk past the house of two brothers he had fought alongside and who had died in the D-Day landings. The camera shows the parents of the two brothers watching the survivor walk past their house, as they quietly lower the blinds. The survivor arrives home to find a welcome party, but he is not jubilant. He has seen too

much. That scene has always seemed to me more real than the newsreel ones. VE Day was a time of mixed emotions, and Lelouch captures it with compassion and understanding.

As the pandemic begins to recede, most of us know someone (or someone who knows someone) who has been profoundly affected by it. Death, illness, loss of livelihood, fragile mental health, are now front of focus in a generalised way that is unusual for us. Mostly we are able to busy ourselves with things and keep the deeper questions at bay. But not in these weeks.

In our Gospel today, Jesus warns his followers (and, through them, us) that what is offered in the Christian life is a mixed experience, from which we will experience mixed emotions. We may be maligned, criticised, even brutalised as a result of our willingness to follow him. But God cares for us: he offers us the beautiful images of sparrows not falling to the ground unheeded, the very hairs of our head being numbered – images that are important to hold onto as we navigate this time of uncertainty. We must hold on, too, to the heavenly vision for which we strive, not only in the future but here and now: for we pray ‘your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’, and it is up to us to help bring that about in whatever ways we can.

It may sometimes mean we have to take a stand, which can make us unpopular and bring us into tension with other things that we value. That’s what Jesus is warning his followers when he says: ‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword [or, as Luke’s version puts it, division]. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother...’

The prophet Jeremiah writes of similar pressures in our Old Testament reading. He was often vilified for the warnings he felt he had no choice but to give to the people he served. He observes that not to speak is as painful as the fear and loneliness that follow after he has spoken.

For any of us, taking a stand can be problematic. At its simplest level we may find ourselves at a meal with friends and someone is being joked about or criticised. Do we stand up for the person and challenge the harmony around the table? I can think of three occasions when I have done that in recent years and none of them went well. But, in each case, something deep within me could not stand by and let the person or category who were being joked about or criticised be demeaned.

At its toughest, taking a stand can involve us losing the 'life' we had (our reputation in public or private, even friendship or family relationships). But if it means we are standing with Christ, then we will find our life in him, always. These are defining moments for us. And in them we will find that we are cared for by God. For the 'new Jerusalem' is our goal, where we will ultimately be at home. Not in a church building, or even on Zoom, but with the God who gave us being, who loves us through our lives and beyond, and whom we will finally see face to face.

What are the things we have learned from these weeks of turmoil and disruption? We should try to hold on to some of them. They will be different for each of us, though there will be common threads. I can think of three things I have learned since 17th March that I don't want to forget.

First, the reminder of the constant need to care for one another. To keep our relationships in good repair. To notice our neighbours. One of the best articles I have read over the last three months was by the theologian John Swinton about an elderly lady called Amanda, who suddenly found her neighbours wanting to know her name and whether there was anything they could do to help her. They had never asked her those questions before, despite living in the same building for years. Will they go on doing so now?

Secondly, we have been reminded of the importance of taking a stand. We have learned from the death of George Floyd, and countless others who have suffered and died for no reason other than that they were perceived as different, that in the third decade of the 21st century it is unacceptable that this should happen. (That has always been true, but George Floyd's death was a wake-up call.)

Thirdly, we have learned again the need to attend to our inner lives. If we don't look after them, we cannot function well in our outer lives - the combined commitments of family, work and community. One by-product of the lockdown is that the church has had many more tentative explorers than it has known for years - people who instinctively know that their inner life matters and that faith is part of how it finds its expression and its anchor. For that we should give thanks.

Taking care of our inner lives also helps us process our mixed emotions after a time of turmoil. For they are part of what it means to be human. William Blake observed that:

‘Man is meant for joy and woe
and, when this we rightly know,
through the world we safely go.
Joy and woe are woven fine,
a clothing for the soul divine.’

Auguries of Innocence (1805)

These three things have a common thread, for they all reflect the two great commandments of Jesus. When someone asked him which were the most important commandments of the Law, he replied: love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength (the importance of attending to our inner lives), and love your neighbour as yourself (the importance of attending to those around us, to treat them kindly and well). So it may turn out to be that, having journeyed through these months of turmoil, we will discover that the answers we have learned are the ones we had all along. But we have learned them afresh, albeit for some of us in the hardest of ways.

That process of relearning is not new. T S Eliot, in the closing poem of his Four Quartets, *Little Gidding*, wrote:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

That’s what happens when we have to do with a God who is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. The verses from the Book of Revelation that follow the words of our anthem today say just that: ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.’ And they go on to say this: ‘To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life (Revelation 21, 6-7).’ Endlessly renewing and refreshing us. Let us give thanks for that too.

Amen.