

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE  
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Reflection – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Epiphany – 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2023**

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These January days still seem very short, but every day the sun rises a little earlier. Nights may be long and cold here, but I hope it's not a dark time for any of us: Epiphany is a season of revelation reminding us again how God shows his light and presence through Jesus to the world. You may have noticed how the readings are all pointing to God as the source of light and new beginnings: the baptism of Christ, the calling of the first disciples and, next week, the new wine of the wedding at Cana.

And that doesn't only apply to the gospel readings. Today the psalmist joyfully welcomes God as *my light and my salvation*. Then, in the reading from Isaiah we heard those well-loved words: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined*. The prayer after communion will talk of Jesus as the *light of the world*, of ourselves as *illuminated* by God's word and sacraments, praying that we might *shine* with the *radiance* of his glory. This echoes the message from Paul to the Corinthians: his exasperation with their petty quarrels is clear: his work is to *preach the gospel of Christ*, to shine His light into human lives, to break down barriers and *illumine* lives.

It's interesting that we have these readings in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. There are several references today to war and divisions but as Christians, we're called to be radiant. Shamefully, the one Church of Christ has been divided from the very beginning – just look at the warring factions in Corinth! Even today we see similar nasty undercurrents in the Russia-Ukraine war - a conflict in no small way egged on by inter-Orthodox rivalries. So we need to take Paul's words to the Corinthians very seriously when we work more closely with other traditions. It's so encouraging that throughout the chaplaincy this week we've been able to worship in Catholic churches and in Lutheran Temples with French Protestants, Lutherans,

Catholics, Orthodox and Mennonites. Christians must be prepared to move beyond their particular understandings and practices, come together simply as followers of Christ. As Paul reminded those Corinthians, we must respect one another's traditions, understand that there is but one Body of Christ. In fact, when we stop putting barriers between ourselves and *all* other people, when we no longer pre-judge others on the grounds of their race, religion, gender or any other differences from ourselves, we then move closer to the mind of Christ.

But even the disciples struggled to see that mind. Jesus didn't select his followers because they were well-educated or well-connected. Certainly not because they were intellectuals or theologians! They were simple people doing ordinary jobs – but what they offered him was trust and commitment. Notice the adverb Matthew repeats in today's gospel reading. Perhaps you spotted it? When Jesus says, "Follow me", ***Immediately*** they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ***Immediately*** they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Did this mean that they didn't stumble along the way? Think of all those occasions when they failed to understand his teaching or rebuked him for things that he did or said. They argued with one another, and in Peter's case, denied him three times before the cock crowed. The one who did lose trust and faith in Jesus was the one who finally betrayed him. The others, the faithful ones, made many mistakes, as we all do, but they recognised him as the Messiah. They trusted.

In today's gospel reading Matthew quotes famous and well-loved words from Isaiah chapter 9, and in doing so he made his purpose clear: *so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled*. Isaiah's words are heard again and again in Advent and Christmas services and usually the reader continues with verses 6 and 7: *For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.....* I can't even hear them without thinking of Handel's Messiah. Guided particularly by Matthew's words, Christians are used to hearing this passage as prophesying the future – but if that's all we see, we're in danger of missing something very important.

We should be wary of seeing these words simply as foretelling Christ's coming. It's worthwhile to look at some of the context in which Isaiah was writing. Why were

*the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali* held in such contempt? He lived in a time when the northern territories of Israel were under attack. The people lived in constant fear: aggressive neighbours had already captured Zebulun and Naphtali. People longed for peace and yearned for a strong and righteous ruler who would honour God and rule justly.

And what's the significance of the Day of Midian? When Isaiah celebrates God's breaking *the rod of their oppressor and the bar across their shoulders as on the day of Midian*, this recalls a story from chapters 6 and 7 of Judges. Gideon and his pitifully outnumbered band of warriors faced *the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the children of the east who lay along in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the sea side for multitude*. Armed only with clay pots, torches and trumpets, Gideon and his men surprised their enemy and their camps were completely routed. As Dennis Bratcher writes, Isaiah is reminding his readers: *God saved the day and made it quite plain that this was no ordinary military victory: this was the arm of the Lord at work, mighty to save*. Even though Israel's kings are weak, the country is under attack and food supplies are scarce, already God is with them. Hold fast, keep the faith!

If we only see Isaiah 9 as foretelling the future, we risk missing a key point. He's writing for people plagued by war, famine, insecurity and weak government. Well, look around us today – what's changed? So there's a message in here for us too. Look carefully at the tenses he uses. Not only *will* there be no *gloom or anguish* in the times to come, more importantly – all the victories that God has won for his people have already happened. He links the past to the present. Already, even now, the people walking in darkness *have seen* a great light; those living in a land of deep darkness - on them light *has shined*. You *have multiplied* the nation, you *have increased* its joy; .. the rod of their oppressor, you *have broken*. God is the only real power in the whole of creation, past, present and future. His victory over darkness is timeless.

Prophecy can be seen as simple fortune telling – or it can mean deep insight into and telling of God's truth. Isaiah's message is clear: God has always been with us and is with us now. As Jesus so often said, his *kingdom is at hand*. When we put our trust in him - and we can choose to do that *immediately*, we can step into our

futures without fear. As the psalm says: *The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?*

Amen.