

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

Reflection – 3rd Sunday of Epiphany – 23rd January 2022

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Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. How often have you heard those words at the start of a sermon or a reflection? Taken from this morning's psalm, of course they're not just words for preachers! They're a potent reminder that God's Law should underpin our speech and thoughts so that everything we say and even think is acceptable in God's sight. His glory is revealed in so many ways and our lives should reflect what we have been shown.

Throughout Epiphany the readings have focussed on revelation and proclamation, the telling and re-telling of God's glory. Today we've heard about the prophet Ezra reading the scriptures at the Water Gate in such a way that the people listened *with understanding*. Then we saw Paul explaining to the Christians at Corinth how God is working his purpose out through the combined efforts of the very different people called into his church. In the gospel we see Jesus reading from Isaiah, declaring: *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing* as he proclaims the start of his public ministry. And in today's psalm, the heavens themselves are *telling the glory of God*, the firmament proclaiming his handiwork. Each day we live *pours out its song to the next*, each night *unfolds knowledge to another*.

The Word is alive, at work everywhere, never confined to scripture, to worship in church or to private prayer. God is waiting to reveal himself at all times - if only we, like Ezra's people, are *attentive*, open to listen and to be moved. There's a symbolism surrounding the place that Ezra chose to read the Law. The Water Gate was the source of life-giving water for the newly re-occupied Jerusalem. It was also the place where justice was administered and oaths were taken. The people, returned from Exile, are thirsty for a fresh start. On the first day of the month they have asked Ezra to stand before them in a place where they find justice and refreshment. The entire community listens for hours, deeply moved to worship

and ready to act on his words. In the Book of Ezra, we're told that when the people re-built the city, they didn't start with the defensive walls. Their first act was to put back the altar on its original foundations, the next to reconstruct the Temple.

In his commentary on this reading, Hugo Bouter points out: *We may set up the Lord's Table, and gather to His name alone in the acknowledgement of His authority and of the liberty of the Holy Spirit. We may try to rebuild the house of God and the city of God, the temple of the living God, so that others see what the Church should be like. But will it be to our benefit, if at the same time, we do not have this intense desire to hear the Word of God and to act accordingly? For that is what characterizes a true spiritual awakening.*

The people are experiencing renewal, rebuilding their community with God's Word at its heart. Though they are moved to tears, Ezra tells them *do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength*. The psalmist likewise tells us that *The statutes of the Lord are right and rejoice the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure and gives light to the eyes*. This is the light of revelation.

Throughout these weeks of Epiphany we have heard of many different ways in which God has revealed his nature: the Christ-child drawing the Magi to him, the voice from the heavens and the Holy Spirit descending at his baptism, the transformation of water into wine causing the disciples to recognise who Jesus really is. Next week we'll hear about Simeon and Anna at the Temple – in their advanced age recognising God in the baby Jesus. Those of us who are getting on in years should take heart! And all of us should be aware that we may encounter God in many forms. We might meet him in an act of kindness, a sudden insight as we read scripture or poetry, in the beauty of music or the natural world. But to feel God with us we need to stay *attentive*. Recently, when I was in Kenya, someone made me smile when he asked me what *busy* meant. He said it stood for Burdened Under Satan's Yoke!

We need to make space in our busy lives. Today's reading from Luke comes immediately after the Holy Spirit has led Jesus into the desert where he resists the temptations of the devil. Time and again he turns to the quietness of prayer to reconnect with the Father. Like Jesus, we too need to refuel – our spiritual life cannot run on empty! Notice how, after his ordeal, again it's the Holy Spirit who leads Jesus *filled with the power of the Spirit* back to his home town, back to his

roots in Nazareth where he will announce to an astonished synagogue that he is the *anointed* one through whom the prophecy of Isaiah will be fulfilled.

None of these wonderful revelations of God at work is an isolated incident from the history of our faith. All are signs of the Holy Spirit actively at work among us. In today's Collect we prayed: *Almighty God, whose Son revealed in signs and miracles the wonder of your saving presence: renew your people with your heavenly grace, and in all our weakness sustain us by your mighty power.* But where do we find that sustenance if we find ourselves in a lonely desert of discouragement or when we're faced with situations we know we should resist? How do we persevere when the going gets tough? We know we're called to use our God-given gifts to continue to be his hands at work in the world today, but we're not all apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers or healers and sometimes we can feel pretty inadequate!

But as St Paul reminds us, each one of us equally, despite our diversity, still has access to *the greater gifts*. In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, his message about the Body of Christ is very timely! Next week Roxana may talk about those *greater gifts* and the *still more excellent way* that St Paul writes about so beautifully in 1 Corinthians 13. The way of Love is a road back to clear sightedness, a way that frees us from oppression, loosens the bonds that tie down our spirits.

Keeping our hearts and minds open to that Love is key. It's quite fashionable now to be seen to be always busy, but St Bernard of Clairvaux once warned: *Excessive busyness leads to spiritual suffering, loss of intelligence and the loss of grace.* Even God needed time to rest on the seventh day! Our current Archbishop took some time for a sabbatical last year and wisely commented in an interview: *I think I would want to say to clergy . . . and to laity: We can only do what God enables us to do, and the rest is his problem.* God needs our time – and space. Busy minds don't offer the Holy Spirit a place to stop and stay – nor do minds that are closed.

In the synagogue, all eyes are fixed on Jesus and there's a certain pride that this son of Joseph, one of their own, has become such a powerful preacher. But very soon, when they realise that they will have no special favours, and that like Elijah and Elisha his work is to be much wider, the citizens of Nazareth drive him out of town, furious that he's talked about a mission beyond his hometown and even beyond the Jewish people. Blinded by their expectations, they're receptive neither to his message nor his love. Let us pray to free ourselves from being too sure of

our view of the world to recognise where God is at work, or too BUSY to find time to see what he wants to reveal. And let us make a receptive space where the Spirit can find and use us.

Amen.