

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Last Sunday after Trinity

24th October 2021

Bible Sunday

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

‘You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life... Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.’ (John 5.39-40)

A few weeks into my curacy I was sent along to a community meeting organised by the local council in the parish where I was working. The purpose of the meeting was to promote good relations between neighbours on a social housing estate. I was put at a table with a representative of the council and a group of residents. The residents were asked what they thought about living on the estate. The response was an angry outpouring of prejudice towards migrant families who had recently been housed there, complaining that they were unfriendly, had different customs and ‘didn’t even speak English’. Finally, one of the residents turned to me with a sickly smile and said: ‘Doesn’t it say in the good book, Vicar, “when in Rome, do as the Romans do”?’

I replied that, actually, the good book says that we are to love our neighbour as ourselves. I asked the lady if she had ever wondered what it might be like to find yourself in a strange city, far from family and friends, where you didn’t speak the language. I wondered if her neighbours might actually be frightened of their surroundings, and of the people living there who were so hostile.

There was a silence, following which quite a sensible conversation developed about how cuts in local authority expenditure had led to the closure of services that had in the past enabled new neighbours to get to know one another - and how, by restoring those services, barriers with the new occupants might be broken down. But the comment about the Bible stuck in my memory as an unwelcome, if somewhat ridiculous, example of how if we are not careful scripture can be weaponised in the cause of intolerance and prejudice.

Today we celebrate and give thanks for the life and revelation of God in the scriptures, a library of 66 books written over a span of some fifteen hundred years, available to 98% of the world's population to read in a language that they know. We treasure the truth of God expressed there, the richness of form and language. We are called to engage with all our senses, to wrestle with the parts that challenge and confront us and to use all our intellect and imagination to understand it. There should always be a sense that understanding is a little beyond our reach, so that we work towards a deeper experience of God in its pages.

The living creative word of God, that is found as a deep stream running through the scriptures, is beautifully described by the prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament reading this morning. It quenches our thirst, satisfies our appetite, brings life and growth - calling us to thoughts and ways beyond ourselves. 'Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.' The creative word of God will shape us and challenge us as individuals and as a community. We need to be absorbed by it and so be led into new understanding. Each time we open our hearts and minds to the scriptures we are given the opportunity to connect to the living God, expressed most fully in God's living Word, Jesus Christ.

But what happens when we don't allow ourselves to see the scriptures as a living text, through which we can find God, but read it with the barrier of our prejudices and fears or use it for our own ends? Jesus's words in our Gospel today, addressed to some religious leaders who had used the scriptures as a weapon against him when they found him healing on the Sabbath, show how easy it is to manipulate the words of God, to stand outside judging rather than risk being open to the potential life within them. Jesus replies to his detractors: 'You search the scriptures because you think in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.'

As with the religious leaders who challenged Jesus, the authority of the Bible and specific texts have been used across the centuries to defend many kinds of intolerance and prejudice, including slavery, racism and the position of women. Scripture has been used as a means of creating barriers to define who is in and who is out; it has been treated as something life denying rather than a way to freedom and life and peace; the living word of God that includes rather than excludes, that brings life rather than denies it. As we enter into the life of God we are called to places and understanding beyond ourselves. God's thoughts and ways are greater than ours.

At present the Church of England is exploring how different ways of approaching and understanding scripture can lead to different conclusions about what it has to say about issues of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. The most intractable issue is how the church should respond to the huge social changes that have taken place over the last fifty years around attitudes to same-sex relationships and questions of gender. There's a growing acceptance that whatever teaching emerges from this process will somehow need to balance the needs of diversity and unity. Those involved will need to have those words of

Christ in their ears as they grapple with the reality that the church contains people with deeply held convictions that differ from their own, yet all are called to be one in Christ. It's hard work, but a necessary process if the church is to move forward in love and faith.

An encounter with Jesus, the living Word of God, changes us, as individuals and as communities – it moves us, shapes us and leads us on new paths to new understanding. In our Epistle today Paul urges Timothy, his younger colleague, to 'be persistent' in proclaiming the message of the Gospel, 'with the utmost patience'. As we are called today to reflect on scripture and use it to develop all our relationships - especially those with whom we disagree - and to deepen our own spiritual lives, let us try to find ways to enter into and be absorbed by God's word so that it ignites the life in us, drawing us together in love, so that God's purposes may be fulfilled in us.

As the prophet Isaiah wrote, 'So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.'

Amen.