

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON
Reflection – Fourth Sunday of Lent – 27th March 2022

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When we put together the service sheets for a Sunday service, I usually prefer the older Collect, but not today. Of the two alternatives given, the one in more modern and direct language seemed best to hit the mark:

Merciful Lord, you know our struggle to serve you: when sin spoils our lives and overshadows our hearts, come to our aid and turn us back to you again; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

I know we are living in uncertain times, but the last thing I want to do today is to give a reflection that's full of doom and gloom – we are in Lent and looking forward with hope to Easter. Our reading for the Lent course this year has been *Hope and the Nearness of God*. What an inspired choice that turned out to be, Jamie! Yet unfortunately, there are people who don't like Lent. It can smack of personal privation, lack of flowers in church, an awkward time when we're encouraged to focus on deeper self-examination. The word many don't like at all is sin – but like so many of the Lent readings, again today's invite us to think about where we fail to follow God's way, and what it means to acknowledge that we are all sinners.

Now I'm sure the vast majority of people are essentially good-hearted. Most of us want the best for our friends, our families, our neighbours and our world. Usually we humans don't set out to make life hard for others. But just because we might not actively commit many sinful *deeds*, that doesn't mean to say that our *words* never cause harm. And our *thoughts*? Hmmm, those uncharitable judgements we pass on people who don't behave or think as we believe they should? I'll leave you to think about which of those three ways of sinning is the most likely!

Today's Collect gets to the heart of what every one of the readings has to say about our capacity for making life complicated. Despite all his advantages, what a total mess the Prodigal Son made of his! Although Jesus has told us that his *burden is*

easy and his yoke is light, many of us seem to have no difficulty in making burdens and yokes for ourselves. As the Collect says, we can struggle to serve God, and *when sin spoils our lives it overshadows our hearts*.

Yet many people nowadays are extremely uncomfortable with, and actually deny the concept of sin. Satan, sin and wickedness we're told are notions that belong to a past age. We're supposed to have moved on from such medieval ideas. These days one has *issues* that grow from one's upbringing and culture. Now I'd never want to minimise the effect that our past has upon our behaviour: modern psychiatry has given us excellent insights into how our minds work. But so does ancient scripture. We read in the Old Testament the Lord *will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations.*' Our ancestors knew as well as us that unless resolved, violence and abuse inside the family and in the wider world can persist for generations.

Sin does exist – and it's not only out there in a world plagued by violence and selfishness. We possess that potential too and unless we grow in consciousness of the wrongs we have done and continue to do, we can't *turn back* to God. We have to acknowledge that in chasing our own desires we often miss the mark. Sometimes, as with the Prodigal Son, we have to hit really hard times before we're ready to admit that we were on the wrong path. But once we do (and this is the good news we find in all today's readings) God is always there, ever-generous, to welcome us back with open arms. Turning back to walk with God, repentance, recognising that we do err and stray, clears the way to hear God's voice again. Sin may keep us away from that abundant *loving kindness* of God but Lent invites us to find the time and space to draw closer to him and to discern his will for us. Like the loving father in today's Gospel reading, God is always waiting with open arms to welcome us back.

Throughout the Old Testament we hear how the Israelites struggle as they turn away from him. In today's reading from Joshua, at last they seem to have left *the disgrace of Egypt* behind them. God no longer needs to feed them *manna*. From then on *they ate the produce of the land*. For with God there is always hope – the hope of *thy kingdom come*, if only we'd let his *will be done*, if only we'd let him guide us there. The psalmist rightly says that we're often *like horse and mule which have no understanding*, but God never abandons us, he preserves us from trouble

and says: *I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go.* Do we want to take the guidance? If we do, we need to be listening out for his voice.

In these weeks of Lent he offers us an opportunity. We can make a conscious decision to take that up, in quiet, in prayer, in looking again at difficult scripture where we may find it hard to grasp the meaning. The simple, heartfelt prayer of St Richard of Chichester may help to focus our minds:

May I know you more clearly,
Love you more dearly,
Follow you more nearly,
Day by day.

We are always invited to knock on the door. It will always be opened for us. As St Paul says, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! This must be one of the most hopeful verses in the Bible!

But Jesus gives a good warning in today's gospel too. I suppose most of us think that the Prodigal Son is the dissolute young man who throws away his father's inheritance on drink and loose women. The one who disregards all the rules in the book. The one with whom we don't identify? But what if the real Prodigal turns out to be the older brother, the good son who had always done his father's bidding? Lent calls us to examine ourselves with a critical eye – which is precisely what the older brother was unable to do. He's furious at the lavish welcome given by his father. What had he got for all his hard work? Absolutely nothing! He's angry and jealous, judgemental, unloving and unwelcoming. And he hates not only his brother, but his father too – simply for their goodness. Doing his father's will has, it seems, taught him nothing. Blinded by self-righteousness, he fails to see the truth of his situation: by staying with his father all the time he has always had everything he needs. We can read these gifts as the riches of God's grace towards us, but in his jealousy, the older brother is unable to value what he already has.

God save us all from self-righteousness!

Amen.