

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

Reflection – 11th Sunday after Trinity – 28th August 2022

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The words of today's Collect:

God of glory, the end of our searching, help us to lay aside all that prevents us from seeking your kingdom, and to give all that we have to gain the pearl beyond all price, through our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Today's psalm lists many joys that come through a close and trusting relationship with God: *They will not be afraid of any evil tidings; their heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord. Those who fear the Lord....have great delight in his commandments. Their hearts are sustained and they will not fear.* Human hearts seem programmed to yearn for the peace that this closeness brings. In Hebrews chapter 10 we read: *This is the covenant I will make with them I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds. And yet We may long for that pearl beyond price, we may hear the Good News, but all too often we fail to seek God's kingdom. Something holds us back - prevents us, as today's Collect puts it.*

The opening of the reading from Ecclesiasticus gives us a clue: *The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker.* God is still there, but we've put up the shutters. We're no longer available, no longer listening. Today's readings all point to the culprit: pride. From the time of the Desert Fathers, it's been seen as the chief of the seven deadly sins – and for that very reason: pride *withdraws our hearts* from God and separates us from his love. It's the sense that I, with my personal views, preferences and desires am in the end more important than God's will: this is the root of all the other *capital vices* as they were also called. Greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony and sloth – they all stem from pride: putting ME first. They're the complete opposite of the virtues we're asked to embrace: chastity, temperance, charity, diligence, kindness, patience, and

humility, virtues that link in closely with the Fruits of the Spirit Paul talks about in Galatians.

Some people say that the forces that prevent us from seeking God are external. They blame the wickedness of the world around us or our flawed human makeup. Others prefer to think of the cause as a concrete figure like Satan or The Devil. Etty Hillesum had the misfortune to be a Jew in wartime Amsterdam so she knew well what it was to live in evil times. In her journal she wrote:

....as we walked through the cold, narrow Langbrugsteegand then waited at the tram stop, "What is it in human beings that makes them want to destroy others?", Jan asked bitterly. I said, "Human beings you say, but remember that you're one yourself....."The rottenness of others is in us too," I continued "I see no other solution, than to turn inward and to root out all that rottenness there. I no longer believe that we can change anything in the world until we have first changed ourselves".

When Jesus went to dine at the house of the leader of the Pharisees, notice that they were *watching him closely*. These were religious people, but it seems that their invitation wasn't necessarily a friendly gesture! What might have been their motivation? Their role was to interpret and uphold God's word – yet it seems that, blinded by self-interest, most of them were unable to see Jesus for who he was. So sure were they that *their* understanding of God was the only truth, that Jesus appeared to them to be nothing more than a terrible threat to their ideas and their status. So Jesus told a parable about finding our place at the table. He made it clear: *all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted*. The pride of the Pharisees has led to complete spiritual blindness, so much so, that he has to remind them of something that they seem to have forgotten. Although they pride themselves on their knowledge of the Law, he then needs to teach them about their duty to show charity to those less fortunate than themselves.

We know what they did to Jesus in the end, and that for all they did, they were powerless against him. In three days the Temple they destroyed was raised up again – and for eternity. Yet not unnaturally we're often tempted to take the short-term, very human view. We might look around us and think that Ecclesiasticus and the psalm have got it wrong. Often it feels like those who *cling* to pride very much

get away with it. Ecclesiasticus may tell us that *the Lord brings upon them unheard-of calamities, and destroys them completely*. But we see the rich get richer and the poor grow poorer. We despair at those who exploit the weak and feel powerless in the face of public figures who lie unashamedly and get away with it. We might ask, are these people really punished for their pride? There's a whole sermon in there about the why, how and when of God's judgement, but this morning, let's reflect on what happens to we humans in the here and now when we ignore the laws that God has written on our hearts.

I recently read an interview by Simon Parkes. He was speaking with Boris Johnson, who was remarkably open about his perpetual busy-ness: *I'd suddenly be conscious of the black cloud of depression moving in from the west, and it was really about not having enough to do, and that's partly why I do it*. Simon Parkes probed a little deeper:

Parkes: *You seem to fear introspection.*

Johnson: I probably do. I just don't dare look under its stone. And I won't. The cupboard will remain locked. I will never go to that terrible fridge marked 'psyche'. I'll never open it. No, forget it. Someone else can do that. Sod it. The truth is, it's probably like *Peer Gynt*. I'd probably find nothing there anyway. That's what I'm terrified of.

Parkes replies, "Or you might find something better than you could possibly imagine".

Etty Hillesum died in Auschwitz, but amid all the suffering and the enormous evil she witnessed, she remained in *life and light* to the end of her life, her heart *open to the riches of God's grace, bringing forth the fruit of the Spirit in love and joy and peace*. When we recognise God as our true friend, in whom we can confide all our inmost thoughts, then who knows what riches of his grace we may receive?

Amen.