

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 4th Sunday after Trinity – 5th July 2020

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

When I saw our Gospel reading today, I was reminded of a conversation I had on the day of my ordination. A friend of mine came to the service and said 'what's that thing round your neck?' I explained that it was a stole, the colour of which changes to mark the different seasons of the church's year: white for celebration (Christmas, Easter), purple for seasons of penitence (Lent, Advent), red for the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and green for the time in between - what we call 'ordinary time'. The summer months in which we reflect on Jesus's ministry as recounted in the Gospels – his stories, his healings, his jokes, his challenges, his arguments with the authorities, his care of the people he met and the comfort he brought to many.

I explained to my friend that the stole of a deacon or priest symbolises the yoke of Christ. 'Doesn't that make you feel like a beast of burden?', she commented. Well, no. The point lies in our Gospel reading this morning. It is true that for quite a lot of our lives we feel as though we are dragging a heavy load along – of pressures, responsibilities, other people's or our own expectations (both sometimes unattainable), a sense of our unworthiness, financial worries, health concerns, uncertainty about the future. But Jesus offers us his yoke. What does it mean?

If we look at a yoke without knowing anything about farming, it's easy to assume that it is something constricting, uncomfortable to wear. But in fact a yoke does the opposite: it is designed to help animals (typically oxen) pull a plough or cart more easily. It is more comfortable for the two who are yoked together, because it enables them to walk in step and share the load evenly. The one who is yoked to another is better able to bear the load.

In Matthew's account, Jesus was probably paraphrasing a sentence from the Wisdom literature, the Sirach, which refers to spiritual teaching in terms of a yoke: 'Put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction.' (Sirach 51:26) It's a clever image, for yokes were also used in training animals – a young ox was placed alongside a more experienced one in order to learn how to pull the weight of the plough. Jesus promises that by walking closer to him, our loads will be lessened and we will find rest in what would otherwise have been a burdensome and lonely journey.

There is a prayer of blessing which refers to 'the simplicity of the Gospel'. There *is* a simplicity in Jesus's message which we do well to hold onto. He often challenged the Pharisees for making religion too complicated, becoming anxiously legalistic and obsessed with detail. Their expertise in the Law had prevented them from recognising the coming of God's kingdom and God's Messiah. Instead, Jesus found an audience among the ones who found themselves unable to keep the Law in all its rigour and who were considered outcasts as a result: the tax collectors and sinners, who heard his message and felt the force of his inclusive welcome. It's a human tendency that in anxiety we fall back on rules and regulations. Anxiety is one of the things that holds us back from being the people we could more fully become.

Paul displays anxiety in our epistle today, in the passage from his Letter to the Romans. Like the young Martin Luther, he seems to feel almost overwhelmed by the impossibility of being 'good'. Luther, as a young monk, used to agonise over what might happen to him if he forgot one of his sins and hadn't confessed it, getting up at night to pray each time he remembered a new one and almost exhausting himself in the process. Then one day he had his so-called 'tower experience', a revelation that came to him in his room in the tower of the monastery where he was living, when he realised that it wasn't all about what *he* did, but about what God had done for him in Christ, and that what was important was to have faith in that. It is interesting that Luther's 'tower experience' took place while he was reading the Letter to the Romans.

Paul seems to have suffered similar agonies. In the extract from the Letter which we heard last Sunday, he used the metaphor of slavery to describe sin, and in our reflection in Marseille we noted that it was also a good metaphor for the pain of addiction. One wonders what the source of Paul's worry was in today's passage. Paul, who had grown up a strict Pharisee, must have been fearful of doing anything that would condemn him by reference to the strict moral code by which he tried to live. I suspect that in his youth he was secretly drawn to what he had been taught were the heretical views of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, so he set out to persecute them, to suppress them so completely that they would no longer be there to tempt him. But there was something deeper within Paul that responded to the unconditional welcome of Jesus, that offered him a sense of acceptance above and beyond his sense of sinfulness, a welcome which in the end he found irresistible, and he sank to his knees in a mixture of

gratitude and terror on the Damascus road. 'Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!'

The welcome Jesus offers is this: 'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me'. Follow me and I will show you a different way of living. Christ doesn't want people in straitjackets, anxiously ticking off how good they have been. Teeth-sucking scribes and Pharisees telling him that John was too austere and Jesus not austere enough. He wants them to love, and in loving to be fully alive, becoming the people God meant them to be. To be gentle with themselves and others. To be humble, acknowledging that they can't do this on their own but to walk in step with Christ, feeling the movement beside them of the one in whom their peace lies.

What matters is to love, and as a result to live in peace. Jesus's own summary of the Law – that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves – is a good test if we are about to do, or say, something we are unsure about. Will this be for the glory of God? Will it be for the wellbeing of another person? Or is it about the satisfaction of my own desires, possibly at someone else's expense? Am I building up, or tearing down? Will it, when all is said and done, be loving? And what would Jesus have done?

By linking ourselves to Christ, walking in step with him, letting him guide our way, we will also enter more fully into the intimacy he had with the one he called Father. We will find the burdens we are carrying lighten, and it will strengthen us to bear other, perhaps heavier, burdens that we may one day have to carry before we reach the end of our human journey. Christ's presence with us will balance the weight of the pressures we live under, help us see them in better

perspective and, in doing so, find rest. And then, God willing, as our Collect today puts it, 'we may so pass through things temporal that we lose not our hold on things eternal'.

Amen.