

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 12th Sunday after Trinity

4th September 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

As we look back through our lives, we are often aware of the people who had a formative influence on us. It may be the people who taught us, family and friends who guided us through difficult times, or those who inspired us in the Christian faith. I wonder who your formative influences have been.

For my part, one figure in the third category was Sydney Evans, the former Dean of King's College London who became Dean of Salisbury Cathedral around the time my family moved to live in that city in the 1970s. Listening to his sermons in those far off days was one of the things that inspired me to explore faith in greater depth and, in due course, to offer myself for ordination. His deep engagement with the issues of the day, holding them in the light of the Gospel, somehow felt like a window being opened onto eternity.

One of the notable things which Sydney Evans did while Dean of Salisbury was to commission a new East window for the Cathedral from the workshop of Gabriel Loire in Chartres, a bold twentieth century addition to a twelfth century building. The window is dedicated to prisoners of conscience, men and women imprisoned for their beliefs, suffering for their faith. The central sections of the

window show Christ as a prisoner of conscience, the victim of a show trial, mocked, crowned with thorns and crucified. The predominant colour of the window is dark blue, but from Christ's head on the Cross comes a triangle of light that shines on the faces of the prisoners surrounding him, while in the centre a shaft of golden light descends from heaven. It's the first piece of glass that is lit by the rising sun each day: the light of resurrection infusing human suffering.

As I was reflecting on today's readings, something made me pick up a book by Sydney Evans, in which I discovered he had written a sermon on the text we heard from the Book of Deuteronomy. It comes when Moses has just completed the giving of the Law to the people of Israel as they stand on the threshold of the promised land: 'See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity... Choose life.' Evans points out the paradox of those words, in that our existence is the one thing we don't actually choose. But, as we mature, we learn that our choices matter. We constantly have to choose, and we grow in stature by the seriousness and moral courage of our choices.

That sort of choice is what the author of Deuteronomy is referring to. It is also the sort of choice Jesus is alluding to in our Gospel reading: 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ... none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.' Jesus is a master of hyperbole, of using exaggeration to make a point. He uses three strong images, each of which is echoed elsewhere in the Gospel. There is the statement about having to 'hate' family – elsewhere he urges his followers not to use family commitments as an excuse to put off discipleship. Then there is the requirement to carry one's

cross, prefiguring the crucifixion. Finally there is the statement about not letting possessions get in the way, a thread which runs throughout the Gospel accounts. Jesus is aware how much our tendency to seek material security limits our ability to look beyond ourselves and become generous and life-giving.

These three images encourage us to pause and reflect. What choices do we make? Where do we put our loyalties? As ever, Jesus challenges us to be honest with ourselves, to see what we need to change if we are to live life to the full. 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' (John 10.10) The message of the images in today's Gospel is that our ultimate allegiance is to the kingdom of God. If we put God's priorities first, we unlock a radical new way of being. Last week Scott spoke to us about the Taizé Community in eastern France, which members join with only the robes they stand up in, having given everything else away to those in need - an act of humility and trust that is humbling to the rest of us.

The basic conviction of both the Jewish and Christian faiths is that God is the essential dimension in whom we live and move and have our being. God addresses us, a voice speaking at the centre of our being from among all that is relative and contradictory about our world. God says: 'I offer you the choice of life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life.'

As Sydney Evans puts it: 'This is God's demand; that we shall take responsibility for what others have made us and for the direction in which we move, the priorities to which we aspire. ... [I]n this necessity to choose, our *humanity* is made possible. ... To become human, God demands that we come out from behind the barricades of our defensiveness; that we face life as it comes, openly and undefended. Becoming really human is bound up with being set free from

this need to defend myself, to justify myself... Really human persons when we meet them are without defensiveness: they are vulnerable, ready to suffer whatever may be the consequences of being open to serve the truest well-being of others.'

That is how Jesus lived and died. He affirmed his identity by rejecting all defensiveness. And the effect of the death and resurrection of Jesus was to make available for others extraordinary resources for living courageously and creatively. His friends became transformed by it, ready to die for their faith. Evans writes: 'The undefended Jesus was crucified by fearful people on the defensive. Jesus chose life. By choosing life he was done to death: but his dying was the moment for the liberation into the life-stream of humanity of new and wonderful resources for living.'

We see an example of this in Paul's Letter to Philemon, an intriguing document that offers a radical vision of the Christian way, overturning more than one set of assumptions of Paul's time. The Letter is written to Philemon, the owner of a slave called Onesimus, who appears to have run away from his master and to have stolen something – probably money. However, Onesimus has encountered Paul in prison, who has converted him to Christianity as he had already done for Philemon. In his letter Paul asks Philemon to accept Onesimus back, no longer as a slave but as a Christian brother. Not to punish him but to forgive him. That would have been a radically new approach to crime and punishment, and to the whole concept of slavery, for a first century writer. Philemon is left with the choice of how to react. We don't know what he did, but the Letter leaves us with the question – how would we respond? Would we, in doing so, choose life, and give life?

Prisoners of conscience were perceived by Sydney Evans as the supreme example from the late twentieth century of what it means to make difficult moral choices in the face of great challenge, of what it means to witness to a faith against the odds. That's what the window he commissioned speaks of still. It's why the Christian faith still challenges those with secular power across the world to account for themselves. Such challenge is needed more than ever today.

Amen.