

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon**

**Third Sunday before Lent - 5<sup>th</sup> February 2023**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd James Johnston, Chaplain*

There are times when I look at a set of Sunday readings and wonder what the church compilers were thinking when they grouped them together. Today is one of those Sundays. It always raises two questions: what did the Bible passages mean for their original hearers, and what might they mean for us now?

We begin with the 'who what why when where' questions that arise when we read any extract from the Bible. Our understanding is deepened once we know more about who it was written by and for, what sort of text it is (history, teaching, prophecy, poetry, polemic), why it was written (is it a reflection on an event that has already happened, or the hope of an event yet to come, or a piece written to persuade others of a truth or a point of view?), and when it was written (was it at the time of the events described, like Paul's Letters, or some years later looking back at them, like the Gospels?).

That's a lot of things to think about when we come across a piece of Scripture, but it's always rewarding. I notice, for example, that none of the women here this morning are wearing hats. In my childhood they invariably did, and there were also no women clergy then. But didn't St Paul say that women should keep

their heads covered in church and be silent? He did, but our understanding of what he meant has been enhanced through a better understanding of the context of his words, written to a particular community at a particular time in a particular place. Only then can we ask intelligently what they might mean for us today. So, ladies, please keep talking and singing, and Roxana, Jane and Christine, please keep preaching. And if any of you wish to wear a hat, remember that (at least in the Church of England) it is now possible for it to be a bishop's mitre.

So what would our readings today have meant to their earliest hearers? A glib response might be that usually in the Old Testament it's about Israel and usually in the New Testament it's about Jesus. And sometimes it's both.

The New Testament scholar Tom Wright has an interesting take on the combination of our readings today. He points out that Isaiah's stinging rebuke in chapter 58 contains the seeds of the Sermon of the Mount, which is where the words from St Matthew in our Gospel this morning are taken. (Matthew, writing for a predominantly Jewish faith community, his focus being to demonstrate that Jesus was the promised Messiah, albeit not like they were expecting.)

Isaiah was insisting that true piety must be part of an outward movement to share your blessing with the world. Fasting is useless if injustice is not being challenged. Look after those in need, and your light will rise like the dawn. God will be present when you call him, provided you do not ignore the needs of others.

Jesus's challenge to be salt of the earth and light to the world was not only an agenda for his followers at the time, or for the early church that was evolving when the Gospels were written. It was a direct challenge, like Isaiah, to the Israel of his time. The ancient call was that the people of Israel should be a light to the world, that through them God's justice and mercy would be shared with all the nations. The city set on a hill, unable to be hidden, was Jerusalem, where (in the prophecies) the nations would come to learn God's law. Yet at the time of Jesus's ministry, the society around him – understandably perhaps, under the shadow of Roman occupation – had become more inward-looking. Jesus's concern was that it was losing its vocation. His call was for Israel to *be* Israel, while there was still time. To take up what the law and the prophets had pointed to, leaving aside the narrow interpretations of some of the religious authorities, notably among the Pharisees, who were so anxious about the detail of the laws about purity that they had stopped looking outwards to those in need. (The best known example of this criticism is the parable of the Good Samaritan.) It was a challenge to authority that cost Jesus his life.

But Paul, in his letter to the early church in Corinth, realized that Jesus's challenge had actually succeeded. The events that it set in train came not through human wisdom or worldly force but the sheer power of the gospel which the crucified one had preached. It was, in the end, Jesus who became salt for the world, a light-bringer to the nations, Jesus who became (when everyone had rejected him) the one set on a hill who could not be hidden. The sermon Jesus preached was an agenda that he himself fulfilled. That's why it can be said of our readings today that they are both about Israel and about Jesus.

What do these readings mean for us now? The injunctions to be salt and light – what do they say to us? Two commodities of which a small amount can make a big difference. A tiny pinch of salt transforms the flavour of cooking. Light from a single candle can light up a dark room. The symbols Jesus uses are powerful.

On 19<sup>th</sup> November 1960, a lawyer named Peter Benenson was travelling on the London Underground when he read in a newspaper that two Portuguese students had been imprisoned for drinking a toast to freedom. He felt disturbed by it, and when he came out of the Tube he went into a church to process his thoughts. There must, I think, have been a candle burning there, for he found himself thinking of the Chinese proverb ‘better to light a candle than curse the darkness’. By the time he left the church, he had formed the idea that if enough people wrote letters to the Portuguese authorities, protesting about the imprisonment of the students, it might have some impact. The idea became Amnesty International, of which he was the founder, with its symbol of a candle surrounded by barbed wire. It’s a candle that has shone brightly in the darkness for over sixty years. Amnesty now has over ten million members worldwide.

Jesus’s words don’t require us all to found a worldwide movement. But what we do need to do is look outwards, caring not just for those who come to our churches but also for those who don’t, not least in a city of great need like Marseille. Under the leadership of the Archbishop here, Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline, a project is currently under way to pool the knowledge and resources of different churches in helping some of the most vulnerable in our communities. There should in due course be opportunities for us all to help in a practical way, without each of us having to invent the wheel ourselves.

Closer to home, it's even more simple. We can be salt and light to those we encounter each and every day. Simple gestures, which can be life-changing. Offering a meal to someone who normally eats alone, a shoulder to cry on for someone living through a crisis, a small beacon of hope to another at a frightening time. It can make all the difference in the world. So let's do it, let's become the agenda of the sermon Jesus gave, giving thanks to the one who showed us how.

'Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly ... Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.'

Amen.