

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Fourth Sunday before Lent

6th February 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Yesterday, at the International Mass for Seafarers streamed from the Basilica of Notre-Dame de la Garde in Marseille, we remembered Père René Tanguy, who died last week aged 91. Père Tanguy helped to found AMAM, the Association Marseillaise d'Accueil des Marins, that runs the Seamen's Club in the port here where members of our congregation volunteer. It was said of Père Tanguy that everything he took on was guided by a desire to serve the poor, especially seafarers in difficulty. It was his particular vocation, which he spent his time in Marseille seeking to live out.

Our Old Testament and Gospel readings today are both about vocation. Isaiah is called to be the prophet who will warn Israel of impending disaster. Simon Peter is called by Jesus to follow him and, in due course, become the rock on which his church will be built. Both responded by pointing out immediately that they were not worthy of the task allotted to them. ('I am a man of unclean lips.' ... 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!') It is a normal human response to the realisation that we are in the presence of the divine. We see it often in the Bible: both Moses and Paul reacted in a similar way. Ordinary people, given extraordinary things to do. Knowing they are not worthy of the task, but doing

it anyway. For in the end it is not about us, but about what God wants us to do. And it is at just such moments of painful self-knowledge that the commission comes. 'Do not be afraid', Jesus says to Peter. And 'they left everything and followed him'.

Seventy years ago today, a young woman learned that on the death of her father she had inherited an office of heavy responsibility that she would be destined to fulfil for the rest of her life. Queen Elizabeth II, who was a long way from home when she received the news, arrived back to face countless days of scrutiny of her response to her unique calling. She asked people to 'pray that God would give [her] wisdom and strength to carry out the promises' she would make at her Coronation. Since then, she has never ceased to live out that calling. There have been times when the way ahead was clear, times when it was extremely difficult. But for seventy years she has kept faithful to the living out of her vocation.

In her Christmas broadcasts, the Queen has often spoken of how she has found strength through her Christian faith. She speaks movingly of the inspiration she finds in the teachings of Christ, of what it means to try to follow his example. With simplicity and sincerity, she offers the assurance that anyone can do this – they don't have to be royal – and that following Christ's example brings a simplicity of heart and purpose that can free us to live life to the full. I have noticed how she conveys the sense that life is about call and response. Next month we will celebrate that moment of the greatest call and response of all: the Annunciation of our Lord to his mother Mary. An ordinary woman, given something extraordinary to do. 'How shall this be?' 'God will make it possible.' 'Be it unto me.'

Vocation. It's a word people sometimes mistake for referring just to ordained ministry in the church. But that's way too narrow. Every human being has a vocation, one that is uniquely theirs. Watch any individual being interviewed, any sports personality, artist or musician, any doctor or teacher, any ordinary individual who has responded to a call to do something extraordinary while going about their daily life – rescuing victims of a natural disaster, or giving something up to help others in distress. 'How shall this be?', asks the interviewer. The answer given often conveys a sense that it was somehow a power beyond themselves that made it possible, and that all they could do was go with its flow. 'Be it unto me.'

Vocation is about a sense of who we really are, what we are really here to do. It is something the pandemic has taught us to consider more thoughtfully. To what, and to whom, should we give our time, energy and resources? What might be the thing that only we can do, with our unique mix of skills, experience and motivation? We need to listen for the answer, to listen - as St Benedict would say - with 'the ear of the heart'. In a recent interview the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, said that at the end of his life he did not expect God would say to him, 'Why weren't you St Francis of Assisi, or Mother Teresa?', but 'Why weren't you Stephen?' Why weren't you fully the person I created you in love to be?

Jesus's call, God's call, has always been to ordinary people – fishermen mending their nets - and it is still the case. He wants us, ordinary people, to use our skills and gifts in following his example. Today you have each been given a list of tasks for which volunteers are needed in our chaplaincy. Please have a look at it and

see what you might be able to offer. As St Paul wrote to the church in Rome, 'we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We all have gifts that differ' (Romans 12.4-6). You are all needed for these tasks, each one of you.

In closing, I'd like to tell you about Mallie. I was reminded of her the other day when someone in the chaplaincy asked me to say grace before a meal. The grace I used was one which this lady said whenever she had people to supper in her home. In the 1980s Mallie arrived in London from the Bahamas. She was a widow, with children who had grown up and left home. She joined a church that attracted people from different parts of the world, often at times of transition in their lives, arriving to work or study in a city that was new to them, where they didn't know many people. Looking round the church one day, Mallie found herself asking: 'What can I do about this?' She began to invite them for meals. Twice a week, for over thirty years, she invited people to supper in her apartment. It became her way of living out the Christian Gospel. Her response to the miraculous catch of fish.

I was in Mallie's apartment on the night of September 11th, 2001. She didn't possess a television, so she hadn't seen the pictures of aircraft being flown deliberately into tower blocks full of people. But her response was the same as it always was: 'What are we going to do about it?'

An ordinary person, called to do extraordinary things. Twice a week for over three decades, until the age of 90, gifting countless souls with generous hospitality, conversation, love and laughter. Over time, it struck me that evenings with Mallie were a little like a foretaste of heaven. I have a feeling she

will be found somewhere just inside its door, notebook in hand, saying: 'Now, what are you doing on Tuesday?'

The words with which she began each meal were these:

Heavenly Father,
in a world where many go hungry, we thank you for food;
in a world where many are lonely, we thank you for friendship;
in a world where many despair, we thank you for the hope you have
given us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Extraordinary. Amen.