

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Third Sunday of Lent

7th March 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

I heard a story this week of a church that had been daubed with graffiti. The writer had angrily written all over the front: 'God is dead'. Underneath, someone else had written, 'Wait Happy Easter.' It's a good example of how to turn on its head a gesture designed to shock, by over-accepting it.

Jesus's gesture of 'cleansing' the Temple in our Gospel reading today was certainly designed to shock. It's often assumed his gesture was one of sudden anger, but it's also possible that it was a planned prophetic gesture – at least, the Gospel writers understood its prophetic meaning when they looked back. Jesus knew well the power of the right gesture. Riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. Kneeling down to wash his disciples' feet. Breaking bread and sharing wine and instructing his friends to remember him when they did it. He is remembered not only for his words, but also for his dramatic actions.

The Temple was the centre of things in first century Jerusalem – worship, politics and national life. Above all, it was the place where people understood that God had promised he would live among them. By the first century, the Passover festival had evolved into a celebration that lasted a whole week, turning it from

a family ritual to a national pilgrimage centred on Jerusalem. All were encouraged to make the journey to the newly expanded temple which Herod was constructing. There was a temple tax, assessed on every Jewish family in order to maintain it. Only temple currency was accepted to pay the tax – Roman coins, bearing the image of the emperor, were not allowed, but conveniently money changers were available around the Temple, at a less than generous rate of exchange. Pilgrims also wished to offer animals for sacrifice at the Passover festival. The animals had to be without blemish, so – conveniently again – it was possible to buy them on arrival rather than travel with them and risk them becoming blemished along the way.

Into this busy scene, at the busiest time of the year, strode Jesus, denouncing the money changers, the animal sellers and all that they represented – challenging not only the temple economy but the whole sacrificial system. There is actually an echo of the prophet Zechariah in the words used, for the writer of the Gospel has Jesus saying: ‘Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!’ Zechariah had written: ‘There shall no longer be any traders in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day’¹ – that is, on the day when the Lord will come to a new and restored Jerusalem. The implication is: the Lord has come, and the traders must go.

John puts the scene of the ‘cleansing of the Temple’ at the beginning of his Gospel. In the other three accounts it comes in the days leading up to the crucifixion. But John is saying near the outset: ‘If you want to understand who this man was, you need to understand this gesture.’ Like the turning of water into wine, which the scene in the Temple comes immediately after. Both these

¹ Zechariah 14.21; 14.5.

actions are referred to as 'signs' - signs through which people would come to believe in Jesus's significance.

Ironically, the religious authorities, shocked by Jesus's action, ask for just that - a 'sign', evidence of his authority to behave as he is doing. There follows one of those oblique conversations in which Jesus says something, it is misunderstood by those challenging him, and it is only later that his disciples understand what he meant. 'Do you see this temple? I can rebuild it in three days.' The religious authorities take his words literally and are outraged. But they remember the conversation, for (in the accounts of Matthew and Mark) this is exactly the charge brought against Jesus at his trial. Yet John tells us that Jesus was instead speaking metaphorically, referring to his body.

We should remember that, by the time the Gospels were written down, Herod's Temple had been destroyed by Rome on the orders of the Emperor Nero. John is urging his readers to see that the resurrected body of Jesus is now the place of encounter between God and humanity. The presence of God in our midst is to be found not in a building, but in Christ himself and the community of his followers.

The Church still has power to make an impression on society by its gestures. Those of us above a certain age will recall Pope John Paul II criss-crossing the globe and kneeling to kiss the tarmac of each country on his arrival. It was a gesture of humility, thanksgiving and peace. As a Polish priest, appointed while the Cold War was still in progress, he embodied non-violent resistance to the Soviet regime, and they couldn't touch him. A modern example of the power of gesture is taking the knee. Five years ago, the American footballer Colin

Kaepernick refused to stand to sing the US National Anthem before a game, saying 'I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of colour'. Instead, he went down on one knee – a profound prophetic gesture now imitated all over the world. Images speak louder than words. Who will forget the protester who stood in front of a column of tanks leaving Tiananmen Square in 1989? Or Alan Kurdi, aged four, on the beach of a Greek island – the tragic image of the migrations of the last decade?

Out of all the dramatic images associated with Jesus, the Cross was the most shocking one of all, as Paul points out in his Letter to the church in Corinth which we heard in our Epistle today. Nowadays we tend to focus on the pain of the crucifixion, but what Paul is referring to is the utter shame that it represented. A naked man (there would have been no loincloth) with no control over his limbs and body. It was how slaves were executed, those considered lowest in society - as a spectacle to spread fear. Yet Paul is saying that this is power and this is wisdom and this is God. It's one of the mysteries of the Christian faith how a shameful and undignified picture of agonising failure and powerlessness became one of the most powerful symbols in the world.

Two thousand years later, last Wednesday a member of our online community gave our weekly Lent talk, 'Why faith matters'. She spoke of how, suddenly finding herself a refugee following a coup in her country of origin, she was sustained by the sign of the Cross through the long years it took her to be granted a right of residence in Europe and a place, finally, to call home again.

Two thousand years later, our community of faith faces a challenge: how do we witness to the sign of the Cross now? Our Lent course is helping us explore what

it means to the body of Christ in these times of disruption, and our planning for the chaplaincy over the next few years will be an opportunity to open ourselves up to the possibilities.

In doing that, we will find continuity through our Old Testament reading, in following the commandments of God which Jesus summarised in two sentences: love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbour as yourselves. We live in a suffering world in need of healing, in need of the love Christ begged his followers to share. The commandments were given to the people of Israel in the wilderness to teach them how to live well in community. Lent is a time of wilderness. Let us use it well.

Amen.