

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 13th Sunday after Trinity

11th September 2022

Eglise du Sacré-Coeur, Oppède

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

When the news came through from Balmoral on Thursday evening, the Church of England put into action a plan prepared for the day that many hoped would never arrive. Guidance was issued about alternative hymns and readings that would be suitable for any service that followed the announcement of the Queen's death. But when we looked at the Gospel reading set for today we decided not to change it, as it seemed somehow appropriate. For Her Majesty's vision of the kingdom over which she reigned, and of the Kingdom of heaven, was a wide and inclusive one.

She spoke increasingly about her faith in recent years, particularly when giving her annual broadcast message at Christmas. In a recent one (2014), she said: 'For me, the life of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, whose birth we celebrate today, is an inspiration and an anchor in my life. A role model of reconciliation and forgiveness, he stretched out his hands in love, acceptance and healing. Christ's example has taught me to seek to respect and value all people, of whatever faith or none.'

In our Gospel reading today, the scribes and Pharisees are complaining about the company Jesus kept – untouchables, who did not obey the letter of the laws by which they ordered their own lives. Jesus responds by telling them three parables: the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost child. (The parable that comes immediately after our reading today is the one we usually refer to as the Prodigal Son.)

Shepherds in ancient Judaea had a difficult job. They were responsible for the flock within their care and had to account for them personally if they died. So sometimes they had to risk life and limb to recover them. Flocks were often communal, so it was a matter of general rejoicing if a shepherd returned with a sheep that had been rescued. This is the image Jesus draws of God – as delighted by the change of heart in a human being (which is literally what ‘repentance’ means) as a shepherd reunited with an endangered sheep he had feared was lost.

The image of the woman searching for the coin is an interesting one. As well as referring to the significance of losing money in a household where there was little to spare, the coin may have been a reference to the head-dress of a married woman, which was made of ten silver coins held together by a silver chain – more or less the equivalent of a wedding ring. If you lost part of that, you *would* look high and low for it and celebrate with your friends when you found it. God, Jesus indicates, is like that.

I suspect that, for some of us, the invitation in these stories to rejoice over someone who gone astray and come back may be a bit unsettling. We can just about get to grips with the idea of people receiving forgiveness for the wrong they have done, but are we not more often inclined to be like the Pharisees, to

respond like the elder sibling in the parable of the prodigal? Tight-lipped disapproval, with just a hint of envy. Being asked to rejoice sounds a bit much.

But we are dealing with a God who is kinder than we are, and extravagantly so. Time and again, Jesus tells of God's overwhelming love for humanity. We notice how unconditional these parables in Luke are. There seems to be no criticism of the sinners. It is in the nature of sheep that they go astray, of small coins that they go missing, and of our children that they sometimes get into a mess. What happened to the one could happen to any of the others. Notice the numerical progression in these stories – one out of ninety-nine sheep, one out of ten coins, one out of two sons. Jesus is saying: 'This could be you.'

And that is the point. None of us is immune from messing things up. Yet forgiveness is at the heart of the Gospel. The Queen understood this well. In another of her Christmas broadcasts (2011) she said this: 'Forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian faith. It can heal broken families, it can restore friendships and it can reconcile divided communities. It is in forgiveness that we feel the power of God's love.' That's how she managed to shake the hand of Martin McGuinness, former leader of the IRA, during her state visit to the Republic of Ireland in 2011, some thirty years after her uncle-in-law, Lord Mountbatten, had died in an IRA terrorist attack.

As humans, we might say that 99 out of 100 is a good enough score, but it's not enough for God. Limitless energy is channelled into rescuing the one who would otherwise be lost. Each of us matters infinitely to God. That is why the words 'for I have found the one which was lost' are so beautiful. For there are times in our lives when we all feel lost – whether through actual loss of health, employment, relationship, reputation, getting things wrong, losing a sense of

meaning and purpose, or just feeling overwhelmed by life – and at those times, to be found, understood and accepted may feel little short of miraculous. And this is true above all when we have no one but ourselves to blame for the mess we are in. But we are dealing with a God who knows us better than ourselves. Even the worst bits. We continue to find a welcome and a forgiveness that are as baffling as they are beautiful. And if we are unsure of that, we have only to look at the Scriptures, where we find the story of God’s searching written all over them.

But loss is real, and it hurts. Even though, rationally, we might say to ourselves that at the time of her death Her Majesty was 96, had lived a full life of devotion and service, was surrounded by people who loved and respected her, had died supported by a deep Christian faith, so that in the circumstances we should not be sad – well, not everything is rational. Many are feeling bereft after losing such a source of stability and comfort in their lives, living as we are through rapid and great change.

The Queen’s resilience was something she freely shared, perhaps never more so than during the pandemic, when she broadcast a message of comfort to the United Kingdom (just as the Prime Minister was being admitted to hospital), or when she appeared alone at the funeral of Prince Philip, in solidarity with all those unable to grieve collectively at the loss of their loved ones.

Loss is also a word which marks this day, for it is the anniversary of 9/11, the day on which 3000 people lost their lives in New York. A day when the worst and best of human behaviour was on show, in an event that for a while seemed to destabilise the world order. Yet the Queen’s approach to world affairs, honed over seventy years of engagement, was consistently one of unity and

reconciliation. She strove, in the words of St Francis of Assisi, to be a channel of God's peace.

The God who continues to search us out each day in radical, life-changing love.

The God who will one day bring us home, in company with Her Majesty and all who have gone before us. I'm not a fan of the strand of Christianity which says that heaven is reserved for those who hold a narrow set of beliefs, or keep to a particular set of behaviours, policed by church officials. I liked it when I heard the Queen say: 'Christ's example has taught me to seek to respect and value all people of whatever faith or none.' Society, and the church, are good at telling people they are excluded, for whatever reason. We live in a peculiarly judgmental age. Yet the Queen's approach was different: inclusive, unifying, reconciling. Although many have said that her Christian faith was traditional in its expression, I would actually suggest that its expression was at times quite radical.

Another Christmas message (2004): 'For me, as a Christian, one of the most important ... teachings is contained in the parable of the Good Samaritan, when Jesus answers the question, 'Who is my neighbour?' It is a timeless story of a victim of a mugging who was ignored by his own countrymen but helped by a foreigner – and a despised foreigner at that. The implication drawn by Jesus is clear. Everyone is our neighbour, no matter what race, creed or colour. The need to look after a fellow human being is far more important than any cultural or religious differences.' Tell me that isn't radical.

We could go on reflecting on Her Majesty's deep Christian faith. There will be an opportunity to do so next Saturday when we gather in Marseille for our Service of Commemoration. But for now let us come back to today's Gospel, with its message of reconciling love, modelled so often by the Queen herself.

If - when – we find it hard to believe that we are lovable because we have messed things up so badly, let us remind ourselves of these stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost child, in which Jesus assures us that the God he called Abba, Father, loves us even though he knows what we are capable of. And that when we turn up at his table dishevelled, disgraced or dismayed, he will surprise us by putting a fine robe on our shoulders, and shoes on our feet, and say 'Come, and eat'. It's what we will do in a few minutes, at his table here. And, as we do so, let us give thanks for the long life of Her Majesty and pray for her son as he takes up his responsibilities. And perhaps we may remember these words which she spoke about her own experience of what faith means:

'Each day is a new beginning, I know that the only way to live my life is to try to do what is right, to take the long view, to give of my best in all that the day brings, and to put my trust in God.'

You can't say fairer than that.

Amen.