

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Third Sunday before Lent

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All Saints' Marseille

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A ninth World Happiness Report was released last year. The team who work on the report have a recipe for happiness, with a number of ingredients which, when blended together, result in a nation's feeling happy: gross domestic product per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make one's own life choices, generosity of the population, and corruption levels. Last year, Finland was announced to be the happiest country, and Afghanistan the least happy one.

Happiness is something we all want to experience. It is our inherent and inalienable right to pursue happiness, as the US Declaration of Independence puts it. People go about their personal quests for happiness in very different ways. There isn't much chance that you make use of the World Happiness Report criteria to gauge your blessedness. You probably have your own recipe for lasting happiness – what is the main ingredient? Family, loving and supportive friends, a fulfilling job, a successful career ... It is quite likely that in 2022 "good health" would be at the top of the list for many people.

Even if you think that happiness is not easily attainable in your case, there must be something in your life that you could give thanks for. Do you remember to count your blessings every day? Or you'd rather focus on the empty half of your glass? How often do we count our blessings as a church? I am sure we have a rather long litany of woes ...

Three recipes for happiness are offered to us this morning. One coming from the book of the prophet Jeremiah: "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord." Another coming from the book of the Psalms: "Blessed

are those who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, whose delight is in the law of the Lord.”

At first sight, they both seem to have a vision of life as a journey marked by divergent paths: turn one way, you will be blessed, turn another way, and you will perish. In our 21st century Western society, this would not be easily accepted as a roadmap. In real life, visible happiness does not always flow from trust in the Lord. We will sing later today: “All my hope on God is founded – he doth still my trust renew”, but we might do so half-heartedly.

So let us consider the third happiness recipe, which comes from Jesus. Standing among a great crowd of disciples and a great multitude of people who have come to him to be healed, Jesus paints a surprising diptych of parallel blessings and woes. The ingredients of blessedness are poverty, hunger, weeping, being subject to hatred ... I am sure the disciples and the crowd did not expect this. In the moral and cultural economy they lived in, which was based on a divine reward system, the poor and the hungry were labelled as being out of favour with God, which brought even more hatred and exclusion. How could Jesus call them blessed? In every age, it is against any logic to congratulate the poor on being poor, the hungry on being hungry.

We didn't expect this either. It sounds raw and provocative. These are not the ingredients we would blend for our happiness cocktail. No self-help book would ever mention this. Poverty and suffering in themselves are neither holy, nor redemptive in the Christian story – Jesus' ministry is all about healing, abundance, liberation, and joy.

Poverty is a wretched condition. I don't know what life in poverty really is, how it feels. I am not in dire need of anything, I live in a comfortable home, my family is safe, I have plenty to eat. But, intellectually, I can say that poverty equals physical suffering, psychological anxiety, social scorn. Surely, 21st century poverty is not as extensive, deep or hopeless as in first century Palestine. Or is it?

We might not be used to seeing shocking poverty in our neighbourhoods. It could be for us only literature or film stuff, like the conditions portrayed in *Slumdog Millionaire*, which we could label as hyperbolic. What don't make breaking news or front page headlines are realities such as the fact that three quarters of the population in Lebanon lives in poverty. Afghan families sell their daughters into slavery or marriage so they can feed the other children. Across

the European Union, some 19 million children live in poverty. Quite easily we dismiss economic migration, which is triggered by hunger, terrible living conditions, hopelessness, as not being a compelling reason to travel to our affluent continent. How many times have we heard that Europe cannot house all the misery in the world?

There is certainly a concern in Luke's Gospel for the outcast. We have already heard earlier this year this unusual and radical theme of God's exaltation of poor and hungry people. Mary proclaimed a reversal of fortune in her Magnificat: the Mighty One "brings down the powerful from their thrones, and lifts up the lowly; fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty" (Luke 1.52-53). And, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus announced at Nazareth "good news to the poor" (Luke 4.18).

Therefore, we cannot evade the moral imperative of alleviating poverty, neither as individuals, nor as a Christian family. We are called to have a tangible commitment to ensuring that all of God's people be freed from the privations of hunger, homelessness, and nakedness.

But let us be honest: our thinking about issues of wealth and poverty is done from positions of relative privilege. The poor become an object of our good will, and we try to buy some virtue for ourselves, because we, the carefree and self-sufficient, who do not count our blessings because we have too many, we seem to have been relegated by Jesus on the precarious side of his blessed-woeful diptych.

Listen to what Ambrose of Milan has said: "The earth belongs not to the rich, but to everyone. It is not from your own possessions that you are bestowing alms on the poor, you are but restoring to them what is theirs by right. [...] Thus, far from giving lavishly, you are but paying part of your debt."

Jesus does not endorse or glorify poverty and suffering of any kind. Nor does he do a sorting exercise between those who will be saved and those who will not. The "blessings" and the "woes" are addressed to each of us. We invite blessing every time we feel empty and are yearning for God. We invite reorientation when we wrap ourselves in self-satisfaction.

Jesus addresses us an invitation to discipleship and an invitation to the Kingdom of God that reverses almost everything we know of how things work. God creates a realm in which no one is poor or hungry or mourning or reviled at the very same time that others are rich, well-fed, laughing and honoured. God

promises to remedy the coexistence of these two opposite circumstances, and, as disciples, we are called to address them in our own lives.

But we have first to recognise how counter-intuitive are God's priorities and promises, and, as the psalmist and Jeremiah encourage us to do, admit the frailty and precariousness of living outside trust in him.

Are we, as a church, deeply hungry for the level of transformation implied in the Kingdom of God? Are we ready to accept our poverty and vulnerability? Bereft and vulnerable in the world's eyes, God will, all the more, bless us with the fullness of his mercy and grace. In response, we should think afresh about how, as a vulnerable community, we could become an instrument of God's hospitality for the afflicted. We should think how we can be, in the words of Teresa of Avila, "the hands with which God blesses all the world".

May God who offers both comfort and challenge grant us the grace to learn the meaning of his blessings.

Amen.