



ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Second Sunday of Lent

13th March 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

It's hard to believe it is only three weeks since I preached in Marseille about faith, noting that just as our societies were beginning to emerge from the pandemic, the threat of war seemed to be looming on the doorstep of Europe. In searching for a definition of faith that day, I quoted some words written by a clergy friend of mine on being diagnosed in his thirties with an incurable illness. He had written: 'Right down deep in the middle of all that is weak and vulnerable and fragile is something absolutely permanent and constant, and which speaks of hope and glory.' Four days after I quoted those words, the tanks rolled into Ukraine.

In that sermon I noted that faith means two things: belief and trust; that the first is about head, the other about heart; that the opposite of belief is doubt and the opposite of trust, fear. Well, there's a lot of fear around now. And when my atheist friends ask (as they often do) why I bother reading texts written millennia ago at a time like this, rather than sitting anxiously in front of a TV screen (which I also do), I would want to reply that this morning's readings speak well into these times. For all three are about trust, trust against the odds.

Abraham is frequently held up as a model for faith. The first of the patriarchs, revered by the three great monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Abraham sets out from his home at God's prompting, aged 75, with no security, no fallback, willing to trust God's promises that 'in him all the families of the earth shall be blessed'. Our reading from Genesis today comes later, when Abraham is still waiting for the fulfilment of the promise, and he tells God that the wait has become too long. Specifically, he points out that what has been promised will only come about if he has an heir.

We see in these chapters of Genesis a pattern of promise, challenge, and promise again. We will hear a similar pattern in the conversation between Mary and the Archangel when we celebrate the Annunciation in two weeks' time. The human response to extraordinary news, extraordinary calling. But this time too there is revelation. God takes Abraham and says: 'Look towards the heaven and count the stars... So shall your descendants be.' There's no record of Abraham's reply. No 'Be it unto me'. But we are told that 'he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness'. His response to his calling was trust.

Fast forward two thousand years, and in his letters to the young churches of Rome and Galatia the apostle Paul quotes this sentence with approval: the fact that Abraham trusted God and ‘it was reckoned to him as righteousness’. Fast forward again fifteen hundred years, and the same sentence became one of the foundation stones for the Reformation when the young Martin Luther found in it the assurance that having faith in God was enough for salvation. An over-conscientious monk, racked by guilt at the sins he might have committed, Luther was increasingly unhappy in a medieval church environment that kept the keys to forgiveness locked tight unless a sum of money was paid. So our Old Testament reading today turns out to be foundational, in more ways than one.

What of our Epistle, the reading from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians? It, too, is about unfulfilled promise. Paul writes that, for those who set their minds on earthly things, ‘their god is the belly’ – they are not looking higher than their navels. But he explains that the Christian faith works differently: ‘our citizenship is in heaven’. Christ ‘will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory’. Christ takes into himself all our shortcomings and sufferings and transforms them, giving our scarcity back to us as abundance. It is what happens at the Eucharist: we bring our bread and our wine, and we are given them back as the body and blood of Christ. The modesty of our offerings is given back in the superabundance of the food that lives for ever. That is how Christianity operates in human experience. We put in all our suffering, frustration, tears and helplessness, and we receive back God’s promise to be with us for ever, never to let us go. It doesn’t make the waiting any less painful, and tragically in the weeks and months ahead of humanitarian and political crisis in Europe there will be much suffering, frustration, tears and

helplessness. But the Christian experience of transformation teaches us to trust. Like Abraham. Like Jesus himself.

Which brings us to our Gospel. It, too, is about trust, though in a different way. The passage includes Jesus's 'Lament for Jerusalem', pointing to how difficult life becomes when trust breaks down. It's a reminder of how difficult it is to trust, and of how the whole of the Scriptures are really about trust, a gift to us to encourage and restore us in trusting God even in the face of great adversity. The American author and civil rights leader Howard Thurman wrote that the Bible was written for those with their backs to the wall. Most of the people it is about are in a minority context – living through exile and persecution, social and ethnic outsiders – all through the Gospels right up to the Book of Revelation where the writer is surrounded by the force of the Roman Empire and it seems as though the fledgling church has come to nothing. That is the context of the Bible. For the last two weeks we have been reminded that it is our context too. Abraham and his wife are two people surviving against the odds. Jesus of Nazareth knows that the next time he goes to Jerusalem it will be to his death. From the cross he will quote the opening words of Psalm 22: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Yet perhaps internally he was also reciting the rest of the Psalm, which goes on: 'Our forebears trusted in you ... they put their trust in you and were not confounded.' Trusting God, against the odds.

The scene in our Gospel reading is filled with gathering menace. But the words in verse 32 point to something else: 'On the third day I finish my work'. The third day. The day that changed everything. The day towards which the preparation of these weeks of Lent is pointing. The day on which all human suffering,

frustration, tears and helplessness are gathered up and transformed for ever.
Easter Day.

Yes, these texts were written a long time ago. No, they don't have nothing to say to us now. For faith, hope and love sustain us, against the odds. Let us live in the light of that knowledge, that trust, today and always. The trust that 'right down deep in the middle of all that is weak and vulnerable and fragile is something absolutely permanent and constant, and which speaks of hope and glory.'

Amen.