

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 2nd Sunday before Advent

Remembrance Sunday

14th November 2021

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate

In my 21 years of living in France, I have missed only one Remembrance Sunday service. It was 10 years ago, when I joined a group, who were passionate about ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue, on their trip to Assisi, in Italy, the birthplace of St Francis.

We wanted to literally walk in the footsteps of those who had gathered, in 1986, for a World Day of Prayer for peace, representatives of Christian traditions and of other religions. A prophetic and courageous gesture. In a world plagued by suffering, hatred and violence, what could be more natural for people of faith than to express their desire for and commitment to peace through their prayers?

It was not a matter of chance that Assisi had been chosen as the meeting place: everything speaks there of that singular prophet of peace that was Francis. In a war- and epidemic-torn era, he achieved the conversion from his chivalrous ideology, that led him to wear the garb of the knights and to seek confrontation and war, to an unwavering pursuit of peace and good for all God's children and creatures. His reversal of perspective continues to inspire not only Christians, but also many other believers and people who, though far removed from religion, identify with his ideals of justice and reconciliation. Francis's most common greeting, 'May the Lord give you peace!' cannot but resonate with everyone's deepest desire.

I vividly remember the experience of entering for the first time the basilica where Francis's body is resting, more than 25 years ago. It is an impressive building, very much in contrast with the modest life of the saint who had espoused Lady Poverty. I was overwhelmed by the frescos depicting the life of Francis, and even more by the silence so imbued with remembrance and prayer, that one could palpably feel "the central peace, subsisting at the heart of endless

agitation” (William Wordsworth, *The Sea Shell*). It is a place I would have gladly made my spiritual shelter.

If someone had told me, on that first visit, that the basilica was going to be shaken, that its stones were going to fall, I would have shrieked in horror. It actually happened in 1997, when earthquakes caused the vault to collapse. The basilica looked so massive and solid – yet it was fragile and transient.

I am sure many of us can think of other sanctuaries damaged or destroyed, be it by hatred, war, natural catastrophes or even by development projects: Buddhist temples in Nepal, ancient religious sites in Iraq, churches in the Philippines, Haiti and New Zealand, mosques blown to pieces in Syria, temples in Myanmar – and, of course, Notre Dame in Paris. These sanctuaries are constitutive of a shared identity, whether national, political, cultural, religious. They are places of anguished supplication in times of war and of thanksgiving and joyful celebration when a peace deal is signed. They are spiritual shelters for many.

Such was the case with the Jerusalem Temple. Its destruction in AD 70, during the siege of the city, when the inhabitants had rebelled against the Roman occupation, would leave a scar on the national and religious identity of Israel, because the Temple represented before, during, and after Jesus’ time, the dwelling place of God’s sheltering protection of His people.

No wonder Jesus’ disciples wanted to know when the Temple stones would come tumbling down and what the sign would be? Would that be the end of the old order of things?

We all want to read the signs of our time, don’t we? The present age is replete with terror and fear, the juices of rage seem to have been loosened. Wars and rumours of wars, political upheavals, societies that at times seem ablaze, natural disasters, climate change... Not only are the building blocks of our societies shaken, but also those of our private lives. People lose their jobs, become homeless, family ties are broken, millions are on a traumatic journey as refugees. 80 million people are currently displaced by conflict, a further 2 million last year.

For all our western intellectual sophistication, for all our affluence and confidence in science, technology, and democracy, we cannot help feeling that things are falling apart. How could one not be alarmed? Are all these signs of the end?

There is nothing new about what we are going through, no matter how unsettling, how deeply worrying it may be for us. No place and no age are

immune to the consequences of human frailty and arrogance, of misguided and misleading leadership. It is part and parcel of our fallen nature.

This week, we commemorated the end of the First World War hostilities. Even if WWI is one step removed from us, we can see with clarity how it epitomises the horror, the fear, the chaos, the destruction, and the dreadful carnage of every war before and since. If some thought that those were the birth-pangs of a new and more luminous age, it took only twenty years before they understood that the human propensity to war and violence is a sin that leaves no one untouched, and one from which we all need to turn in repentance. That repentance can only begin with remembering.

We gather in churches on Remembrance Sunday to remember the countless lives lost in the violence of warfare; to remember those who died, so that others might live; to remember that every human life is a gift of God which has infinite value.

When we think of the contrast between the terrible, merciless forces of armed conflict and the lives and destinies of the individuals caught up in them, silence is the only language that could, somehow, do justice to the feelings, to the memories, to the imagination. And that is why, at the cemetery, later this morning, we shall keep a long moment of silence. A silence that will embrace us and open us to God's presence, with the assurance that, as a collateral victim of war, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer has said, "God is for the suffering people".

We shall stand in silent remembrance, and we shall grow in hope, the hope we put in God, not in human-built edifices. In the present disorder, our task is to trust God's holiness, and to testify to it. "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful." (Hebrews 10.23)

God's faithfulness means that human violence and death are not what ultimately defines our history, either as individuals or as a community. There is a more fundamental story of which we are all a part: God's forgiveness and peace will prevail because they are, in all eternity, what God draws us into.

Christ urges us, as his disciples, to disbelieve all rapid and dramatic solutions to the problems of the world, and to announce the Gospel of the Kingdom of God – a reign of peace which will come perhaps slowly and almost unnoticed, through modest lives lived faithfully; it will develop by means of a community of faith that speaks to every kind of woundedness and proclaims resurrection and healing; a community whose members encourage and 'provoke one another to

love and good deeds' (Hebrews 10.24); a community that is willing to embark on the demanding journey of reconciliation and peace.

He who has promised is faithful – may the Lord give us his peace!

Amen.