

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**  
**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**  
**Sermon – 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity - The Blessed Virgin Mary**  
**Baptism of Elizabeth and Gabriel Roumieu**  
**15<sup>th</sup> August 2021**  
**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

It is a pleasure and a privilege to welcome the family and friends of Elizabeth and Gabriel today for their baptism. We will be doing for them something which from earliest times the church has done: welcoming new members of the family using ritual and symbol, in a liturgy that is both ancient and ever new.

Today we are celebrating the two sacraments which Jesus instructed his followers to celebrate. Matthew's Gospel ends with Jesus's words: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' This is what we do in baptism. And on the night before he died, while sharing the Passover meal with his friends, Jesus asked them to continue breaking bread and sharing wine, actions which formed part of that meal, but thinking of them in a new way as his own body and blood: 'Do this in remembrance of me.' This is what we do in the Eucharist, the Holy Communion.

Sacraments are physical things – they have been called 'the outward sign of an inward grace'. The purpose of sacraments is both to symbolise and confer that grace, that gift of God's presence and the assurance of God's love for us. Today we are doing both – baptizing and breaking bread.

These children are joining a long line of witnesses, here at All Saints and beyond. The Letter to the Hebrews says: 'since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us' (Heb. 12.1). One of the symbols we use in baptism is oil. Olive oil, which was a precious commodity, has a rich symbolic value in the Scriptures. Kings were anointed with it to show they were chosen by God. It was also used to sanctify priests in the temple. In the ancient world it was also used to anoint athletes before they began a race, to make them more supple. As in a relay race, the Christian faith is handed on. It is literally what 'tradition' means. Today promises will be made on behalf of Elizabeth and Gabriel to learn of its riches, and we pray that in time their own discovery of its beauty will deepen. It will be their response to God's love, for God will be with them as they grow in faith.

God will be with them. It has been said that the word 'with' is the most significant word in the whole Bible. At Christmas we celebrate the coming of Christ as Emmanuel, God with us. We believe in a God who is not remote from us. Our faith is incarnational, authentic to human experience. Christ knew our human experience and there is nothing of what we feel that he has not felt.

This takes us to the second of the symbols we use in baptism: water. The symbolic immersion in water used by the early church in baptism was not only a symbolic purifying, a cleansing from sin, but also a symbolic partaking in Jesus's life, death and resurrection – the new member of the church was being born into a new life with God.

At the end of the service, we will give Elizabeth and Gabriel the final symbol of their baptism - a lighted candle, to take with them so that they may shine as lights in the world. Showing the world what love means.

Today is a special day on which to be baptised – the day on which the church celebrates the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary is loved by Christians all over the world for many things. Here in Marseille her statue, known affectionately as ‘la Bonne Mère’ / the ‘Good Mother’, looks out over the city from the Basilica of Notre-Dame de la Garde. This chaplaincy was originally founded to care for seafarers, a vocation we still honour today. Seafarers setting out from the Port of Marseille traditionally pray to Mary, ‘Star of the Sea’, one of the many titles by which she is known. Our anthem this morning by Grieg uses that title – *Ave, Maris Stella*.

One thing it is worth pausing to reflect on is that it would have been Mary who introduced Jesus to the faith of his ancestors. Just as today we will ask Elizabeth and Gabriel’s parents and godparents to help them come to faith as they grow up, Jesus’s deep knowledge and trust in God were first learned at Nazareth. So it is fitting that we are celebrating her feast today as we welcome these children in baptism.

Through baptism we become full members of Christ’s family. We sometimes refer to Christ as a King, and if he is a king that makes his family a royal one. Yet the type of kingship involved is not what the world expects. Jesus’s crown was made not of gold but of thorns, and the place from which he reigns not a throne but the cross. That is the sort of family these children are joining. Subversive, counter-cultural, on the side of the marginalised, extravagant in its loving and committed in its service. So we welcome Elizabeth and Gabriel today as they step into a wonderful tradition, with its story of the upside-down kingdom where people feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, care for the sick and visit prisoners because each one is infinitely valued as a child of God.

Elizabeth, Gabriel, welcome to this family. May it bring you immeasurable blessing and unbounded love.

Amen.