

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

**St Luke the Evangelist**

**16<sup>th</sup> October 2022**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

Over the last few weeks a number of people I know - including members of our chaplaincy community, along with family and friends - have been faced with physical and mental suffering. Suddenly it all feels rather close to home. In case one were needed, it has been a reminder that none of us should ever take our health for granted.

In two days' time the Church will celebrate the Feast of St Luke the Evangelist. Tradition has it that he is the author both of the third gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles, and also a doctor. That's why St Luke is the patron saint of physicians and surgeons. It's a time of the year when we are called to reflect particularly on the nature of health and healing.

Health is a hugely complex matter, healing an even deeper mystery. Healing is not necessarily the same as cure. In our intercessions in church, we often refer to those who suffer 'in body, mind or spirit'. Suffering can be a combination of all three. A physical illness almost invariably brings with it a degree of mental suffering, and it is known that a troubled mind can result in physical illness. Both

physical and mental suffering can and do affect our spirits. Jesus understood well the interactions of these different parts of us. It's one reason why older translations of the Bible used 'wholeness' as a word for healing. Luke, the doctor, was fascinated by his impact of Jesus on those around him. He records the stories of healing by Jesus with a combination of awe and a sense that these events were bringing people close to the heart of the divine.

One thing Jesus encouraged in those who came to him for healing was to trust. It's another word for faith. Whenever he encountered it, he assured the person in front of him that it was working to their benefit. 'Don't be afraid. Your faith – your trust - has made you whole.' Trust, in particular, helps unlock our capacity for love, and love is the thing that endures when everything else has come and gone.

Jesus knew all too well that life can be unfair, painful and short; that sometimes good people contract serious disease while sometimes wicked ones live long and healthily. Yet he never doubted the power and the love of God. Dealing compassionately with those who came to him for help, he didn't seek to explain their suffering or look to God to do so. He simply said that God was to be trusted, even in the darkest of days: we are to trust that God loves us, in sickness and in health, and that it is there we will find the inner wholeness and tranquillity that even disease will not overcome.

I am, emphatically, not saying I have answers to any of this. I have no idea why one person gets ill and another does not. I know even less why one person is cured and another not. And I am more than ever conscious that anyone who is not having to confront a serious illness has no right to presume how they or

anyone else might feel in the face of it. But over the decades in which I have observed illness and death in those I have loved, what I have come to glimpse is that illness is a destructive process that can sometimes, sometimes, be made into a creative one, if only fleetingly. And that once that possibility is accepted, the world can become a different place. Illness can have the paradoxical effect of healing old hurts, old relationships, creating community where none existed, enabling reconciliation, enabling things to be expressed that would otherwise be left unsaid, or simply making time feel more meaningful and precious. When it does that, amid the sorrow and pain, there is also gift and grace.

Illness always asks of us the question: how are we to respond in supporting those we love through times of distress, and how will we respond when our turn comes? For the Christian, it also asks the question what resources our faith might have to offer as we try to do either or both of those things.

We have talked in the past about prayer. We should never underestimate its usefulness. Later in this service we will name all those for whom we have been asked to pray by members of this chaplaincy. You may be surprised by the length of the list. We pray for each one of them on the first Friday of every month, in a quiet, reflective service held online, holding them before God, in the light of God's love. Sometimes we may find an idea emerging from that time of prayer, of something practical we can do to help. Services like these are always holy ground.

We should also never underestimate the value of presence, whether physical or virtual. A few years ago, a friend of mine was facing a time of severe testing. In those weeks I witnessed the extraordinary effect of a brief message, a few words of text, a quick phone call. For my friend they were transformative. To show

that we care, even if there is nothing that we can do to take away what is happening. Offering to be alongside those we love in their distress is a reflection of the incarnation itself, of God being with us in Christ. The very notion of incarnation speaks a profound truth about the nature of being. So send the text, make the call, keep in touch. It can change a person's world.

Which brings me back to the other thing that we must never under-estimate: the power of trust. It doesn't mean that we or those we love will necessarily be cured. But we can pray to be made whole – stronger, at peace, reconciled to what is happening, to us or to them. We must remember that what the Gospel promises is not eternal health, but eternal life: a quality of relationship with God in Christ that no affliction can take away. In the words of the spiritual writer Michael Mayne<sup>1</sup>, it is that kind of confidence and hope in God which is 'the real inward healing of the human spirit' – 'that relationship which no disease, no process of ageing, and not even death can destroy'. Jesus's final words from the Cross were 'Lord, into your hands I commend my spirit'. An ultimate expression of trust, which we can make our own.

Last Wednesday I attended a Requiem Eucharist for the chaplain of the Anglican Church in Nice. He had died very suddenly, only months away from his retirement. The community was still in shock, yet there was something about the choice of words and music in the service that spoke strongly of trust, and therefore of hope. We sang an Easter hymn, and then like all such services it ended with a commendation, reminding us that pain and suffering and death do not have the last word.

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<sup>1</sup> *To Trust and to Love* (2010).

That's the mystery. If we can own this, if we can integrate it into our responses to suffering, we will discover that the Christian faith has a very great deal to offer by way of resources to face the toughest of times. For ours is an Easter faith. It is what St Luke the Evangelist understood when he looked back at the life and death of Jesus, and why he wrote his Gospel. As the commendation in the service last Wednesday put it: 'All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.'

Thanks be to God.

Amen.