

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Second Sunday before Lent

20th February 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Sometimes the chaplaincy phone rings and I hear someone say in a less than steady voice that they, or someone close to them, have received a difficult diagnosis. I'd like to reassure you that if you were the one making that call, what you would not hear from me is the bald question: 'Where is your faith?' Not only would it be monumentally insensitive from a pastoral point of view, but it would quite likely result in the person at the other end putting the phone down.

I wonder if the disciples felt a bit like that in our Gospel reading this morning when Jesus asked them: 'Where is your faith?' Here they were, experienced sailors, crossing the Sea of Galilee, known for its sudden storms that blow up without warning. Yet this one was ferocious, and even the seasoned fishermen were overwhelmed by fear, ousting any faith they had in their ability to get to the other side of this. 'Master, we are perishing!'

But Jesus speaks, and the storm is stilled. Those hearing this story would have heard the same echo we heard today when we read Psalm 65 together: 'You silence the roaring of the seas.' (Psalm 65.6) And not just Psalm 65 – Psalms 18, 29, 89, 104, 106 and 107 as well. The point Luke was making was that Jesus had

the same dominion over the raging waters – the biblical symbol of chaos – as Yahweh, the Creator of all. Bringing calm to the most terrifying of events.

Luke comforts his hearers that, like many of them – many of us - the first disciples were slow to learn. ‘Who then is this?’, they ask in amazement. It’s the question asked and answered throughout Luke’s Gospel. And it is counterbalanced by Jesus’s question back: ‘Where is your faith?’

Faith means two things: belief and trust. One is about head, the other about heart. The opposite of belief is doubt. The opposite of trust is fear. That’s what the disciples have succumbed to in this story: knuckle-whitening, gut-wrenching fear. We have all known it.

The early Christians chose as the symbol of the Church a simple drawing of a boat with a cross for the mast. Buffeted by persecutions outside and conflicts within, the emerging Church must often have seemed like a boat on a stormy sea. There are times when our lives feel the same, especially over the last couple of years. Just when the pandemic has begun to subside, there is talk again of the possibility of war between nuclear powers on the doorstep of Europe – a threat we had almost forgotten since the Berlin Wall fell thirty years ago. And all the while the ever-growing threat of the climate emergency. ‘Master, we are perishing!’

Someone who once suffered a series of disasters was asked to write down their definition of faith. They wrote: ‘Faith is the simple trust that life can still be good, despite the fact that it is painful and difficult.’ Faith is something that, over time, through the grace of God, we can end up developing as an attitude – an attitude of trust, like the one expressed in the Breton fisherman’s prayer: ‘Dear Lord, be good to me, for the sea is so wide and my boat is so small’.

People of faith are not immune from suffering. But faith offers the ability to live in the present moment without the corrosive effects of fear, despite all the risks and uncertainties that surround us. The Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard wrote that Jesus was able to live entirely without anxiety because 'He had eternity with him in the day that is called today: hence the next day had no power over him'. Reflecting on this, Michael Mayne, the late Dean of Westminster, wrote:

'The future, with all of its anxious questions, loses its power and falls into perspective once you see this present moment in the light of eternity – once you know with absolute trust that you are held at this moment by the God who created all that is and who loves you ... with an unchangeable love.'¹

Dying on the Cross, Jesus quoted these words from Psalm 31: 'Lord, into your hands I commend my spirit.' That's an act of faith. Even when everything seems lost. For that is how it works. Let me give you an example.

A friend of mine with a demanding clergy role was diagnosed in his mid-thirties with an incurable degenerative disease. At the time he wrote a reflection about St Paul's idea that (to use his words) 'we are like clay pots in which God places the treasures he gives us, ... like a candle or something precious and bright flickering with gold and glory. Sometimes the clay cracks and becomes brittle and infirm, but actually even if that happens, the light and the glory just shines out through the cracks, and the good things stored up for us by God don't change at all.'

¹ Michael Mayne, *Giving Attention – Becoming what we truly are*, 2018.

In the years since my friend wrote those words, his light has shone very brightly indeed. I went to the leaving service held for him when he had to retire early. It was deeply sad, yet somewhere in the middle of it all there was an even deeper trust in God. ‘Lord into your hands I commend my spirit.’ It took me back to the reflection he had written some years earlier, which ended with these words: ‘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.’ If you asked me for a definition of faith, I couldn’t put it better than that.

But it’s not all. Faith is just one of what are known as the three ‘theological virtues’ described by St Paul in his first Letter to the church at Corinth: ‘And now faith, hope and love abide, these three.’ They are known as the ‘theological virtues’ because they come from God and help us to live for God. This year in our Lent course we will be exploring hope, as we meet each week to discuss a book called *Hope and the Nearness of God* by Teresa White. I hope you will join us – it should offer a rich resource for living through times of uncertainty.

Faith, hope and love, these three. The three are entwined in the symbol of the Camargue Cross which you see at the top of your service sheets this morning: a cross for faith, an anchor for hope and a heart for love. The Camargue Cross forms the sculpture on the *Monument aux disparus de la mer*, on the promontory below Notre-Dame de la Garde that was once a gun turret. A place where language falls silent in grief, where families come to reflect, a place from which they can look out across the sea (symbol of chaos and, for them, source of tragedy) through the heart in the sculpture to the horizon beyond. Seeing a world through love, which Paul says is the greatest of the three. For love, in the end, is stronger than everything – even doubt, despair and fear. That’s what we

will discover again at Easter. That's why this church was built and why we gather in it each Sunday.

Faith, hope and love. Today we have talked of faith. Through the weeks of Lent we will talk of hope. And we will talk of love for the rest of our lives.

Amen.