

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 3rd Sunday after Trinity

20th June 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

In the village where I live the tourists have begun to arrive. Standing on street corners, you see them peering at maps, working out how to find their way to the national park which is one of the wonders of the coastal region of Marseille. Often they become lost in the byways of the village, which is built into a steep hill with roads that loop round one another. You see them holding their map still, while they try to reorient themselves and find their way back to where they were meant to be, everyone gesticulating towards different streets. Sometimes in desperation they even end up holding the map behind them as they search for the right direction. I admire their perseverance while sympathising with their confusion. It struck me this week that their searching, with its mixture of intensity, confusion, weariness and determination, has something in common with a journey of faith.

Today's Gospel reading is one of the best-known stories about Jesus. The scene touches something deep within us, as it's something we all experience at different times in our lives – the sense that we are about to be overwhelmed by something outside our control. The imagery in the story is powerful. In a maritime city like Marseille, both the opportunities and the dangers of the sea

are part of the collective consciousness. All Saints owes its very existence to the city's maritime vocation, and our commitment today to the AMAM seafarers' club is but the latest manifestation of this church's concern for the welfare of 'those who go down to the sea in ships', in the words of today's Psalm.

The sea in the biblical imagination represents chaos, and a storm at sea the threat that chaos will overwhelm us. The image appears throughout our readings and hymns today. The words which God speaks to Job in his suffering reveal to him how dependent he is on the God who is both powerful creator, unfathomable mystery and loving consoler. Yet Job has to learn it the hard way. In Mark's Gospel the disciples are discovering the same truth. In a severe storm the waters above and the waters below combine into a single mass – almost like an 'undoing' of the first act of creation, which began with God dividing the waters below from the waters above (Genesis 1.6-8). No wonder the disciples are terrified when a violent storm blows up on the Sea of Galilee, and they wake Jesus in fear: 'Do you not care that we are perishing?'

Mark's answer is clear. Yes, he does care, but there is more. Mark, who began his Gospel saying that it is about 'the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God', now shows Jesus's identity being revealed to his closest followers. They are, as ever, slow to take it in, taken aback when they see their teacher's impact on the elements ('Who then *is* this?'). But Mark's original hearers, and through them we, are being encouraged to understand that this is the Messiah, the anointed one. And not only that. He is one with the Creator, who can divide the waters. This is Paul's 'new creation' coming to birth, in a small boat on the Sea of Galilee.

There's another layer of meaning in the story, albeit referred to obliquely. The passage begins with Jesus saying to the disciples: 'Let us go across to the other side [of the lake]'. They are going from Jewish to Gentile territory, ending up in the land of the Gerasenes, where Jesus will heal the demoniac named Legion. This story, therefore, also points to the fact that the promised Messiah, revealed during the crossing of the lake, is not just for the Jewish nation but also for the Gentiles. This good news is for the whole world.

What does this story tell us about our own faith journeys? When we wake in the small hours, sometimes we are able to admit to ourselves that we are travelling on a sea of chaos. If nothing else, the last fifteen months have taught us that. For much of our lives we are able to reassure ourselves that we are in control of events, but ultimately we have to face the reality that we are not. What then? Do we find ourselves able to trust in God in the storms of our lives? That's a lot easier to preach than to do.

But there is wisdom in this story. When we are tempted to cry out; 'Do you not care?', Jesus responds by asking us to choose faith over fear. He himself had complete trust in the Father, even when the world was caving in on him – the final word from the cross, in Luke's account, is 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit'. The question for us which this passage raises is: 'What would our life be like if our fear about life without God was dwarfed by our wonder about life with God?'

Paul gives us a glimpse of the answer. Ever a believer in the rhetorical power of lists, he notes that people of faith are, like everyone else, prey to 'afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger'. But they can, in time, confront a list like that with 'purity, knowledge,

patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God', in good times and in bad. For the Christian message is not, and never has been, 'believe in Jesus and everything will be fine'. There is challenge, adversity and often sacrifice. But the mystery is that it is in those times that Christ is revealed most intimately to us. And it is then that we discover, like the disciples in the boat, that no storm can ultimately overwhelm us. We may be 'dying, [but] see – we are alive', 'having nothing, and yet possessing everything'.

If we can allow faith to conquer fear – even blind faith, the kind that hangs on when all familiar points of reference have become lost in turmoil and darkness ('My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?') - then we shall be like those who have nothing yet possess everything. Jesus invites us by his example to have faith that whatever threatens us cannot overcome the power of God to bring peace and strength. ('Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.') The God who upends all that we expect is able to transform our fear into courage. Even when we feel completely lost.

Finding faith in fear is not easy, but it's what we are called to do. Resting in the knowledge that God is stronger than the storm, as the words of all our hymns today attest.

'Thy hope, thy confidence, let nothing shake;
All now mysterious shall be clear at last.
Be still, my soul, the winds and waves still know
His voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.'

It's also the message of our anthem this morning: 'Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee'. Jesus had an absolute trust in the power of God to save. Such was his intimacy with God that he never doubted his

Father's love for him. It was this love – a profound experience of God's total, unconditional love - that Christ made present to his disciples, and still does.

For we are all travelling across the water, on a sea of chaos. But our prayer, and our belief, are that we will ultimately find our way home.

Amen.