

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon – 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

**21<sup>st</sup> August 2022**

**All Saints' Marseille**

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It's a wonderful moment in the Gospel. Jesus noticing human suffering, in a woman who apparently hasn't even asked him for help, curing her of a condition that was causing pain and embarrassment and hardship with a simple, powerful gesture of love. And being castigated for it by the religious authorities.

We are not given the name of the woman, only her condition, which like so many of the people Jesus healed leaves her on the margins of the community. Jesus is again healing on the Sabbath, and as in all the Sabbath healings the religious leaders seem unable to rejoice in the good he has done, but denounce him as a lawbreaker. He points out the hypocrisy of their position – they do work to protect their animals on the Sabbath, but they condemn him for relieving suffering in human beings.

The religious leaders have forgotten the original purpose of the Sabbath – to bring people release and freedom. Jesus's words to the woman are: 'You are set free'. The crowd see her straighten up as if he has literally freed her, lifting a weight from her back. Her response is immediate: she praises God with joy, a reminder that Sabbath is about worship and freedom rather than anxiety over

whether a rule has been broken. In response, the religious leader tries to turn the crowd against Jesus as he perceives his own authority ebbing away. For if the minutiae of the regulations don't matter, part of his role becomes irrelevant. Self-interest places him in conflict with Jesus's radical, healing love.

Is it possible we are being too harsh on this religious leader? When the people of ancient Israel were exiled in Babylon, they reflected on their history (which is how the Old Testament came to be written) and concluded that they had lost the promised land because they had drifted away from the Law of Moses. Although they were later able to return to the land, they found it plundered, the temple at Jerusalem in ruins. To add insult to injury, by the time Jesus was teaching they found themselves once again under occupation, this time by imperial Rome.

The Pharisees regarded themselves as the guardians of religious orthodoxy, how to live in strict compliance with the Law, thereby hoping to avoid the fate that had befallen their ancestors in losing the land. It's not difficult to see how, in that context, an anxious conservative mindset came about. We see examples of their rule-bound anxiety throughout the Gospel accounts. Yet Jesus often came into conflict with it, pointing out how it was causing them to fail to keep the greater law of God's love.

There are also wider layers in this story which relate to society as a whole. The American theologian Walter Wink wrote of this passage that, by healing the woman on the Sabbath, Jesus restored the Sabbath to its original meaning of healing from bondage. By touching her, he revoked the Holiness Code with its patriarchal attitudes to women. By speaking to the woman in public, Jesus

overturned male restraints on the freedoms of women. By placing her in the middle of the religious gathering, he challenged the male monopoly on the means of grace and access to God. From this point of view it is a profoundly radical encounter, pointing towards a new order of society in which distinctions of gender will be broken down.

We have seen before how Luke places women at the centre of the new order which Jesus is ushering in. They are shown to be prophets of the Kingdom, frequently braver and smarter than the men around them. Yet for many centuries the Church did not respond to the implications of this. It is true that there were flashes of Jesus's radicalism in some of Paul's early writings, particularly the sentence in the Letter to the Galatians (3.28) in which he asserts that: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.' Distinctions of race, class and gender, it states, are to be swept aside. Yet many more of Paul's writings instead reflect traditional attitudes to women of his time, in which they are to be 'hushed and hatted' in religious gatherings. It took nearly two thousand years for many institutions – including, thanks be to God, the Church of England – to accord women full status within their hierarchies. Yet it was hard won, and other churches have yet to begin the journey.

It also took eighteen hundred years for most churches to come to terms with the fact that slavery was fundamentally wrong. When in England advocates such as William Wilberforce began to point this out, their most vehement opponents were 'traditionalist' and 'biblical' Christians – including many Anglican Bishops – who pointed out that Scripture and tradition had always accepted the fact of slavery. Wilberforce argued instead that slavery stood against the essence of

Scripture and against everything Christ stood for, and that it was time for it to be outlawed. A nineteenth century example of allowing the greater law of God's love to prevail.

Today the battleground is about the full inclusion (or otherwise) of those who identify as LGBTI+. Over the last couple of weeks this topic was in focus again at the Lambeth Conference, the meeting of 650 Bishops from across the Anglican Communion that takes place in Canterbury approximately once a decade. The Anglican Communion is not a single church, but made up of over forty autonomous and independent churches, all in communion with the see of Canterbury.

Although the subject of LGBTI+ inclusion was not on the agenda for the Conference, it was (as it has been for the last 25 years) nonetheless the elephant in the room. A group of so-called 'traditionalist' Bishops asked the Archbishop of Canterbury, who chairs the Conference, that the Conference should effectively resolve to condemn LGBTI+ Christians as living lives incompatible with Scripture. The Archbishop refused. What he did instead was to write a letter to all the Bishops, noting the vastly differing contexts in which the churches of the Anglican Communion proclaim the one Gospel of Christ. He wrote this:

'For the large majority of the Anglican Communion the traditional understanding of marriage is something that is understood, accepted and without question, not only by Bishops but their entire Church, and the societies in which they live. For them, to question this teaching is unthinkable, and in many countries would make the church a victim of

derision, contempt and even attack. For many churches to change traditional teaching challenges their very existence.

‘For a minority, we can say almost the same. They have not arrived lightly at their ideas that traditional teaching needs to change. They are not careless about scripture. They do not reject Christ. But they have come to a different view on sexuality after long prayer, deep study and reflection on understandings of human nature. For them, to question this different teaching is unthinkable, and in many countries is making the church a victim of derision, contempt and even attack. For these churches not to change traditional teaching challenges their very existence.’

The Archbishop concluded with a call to truth and unity but stated: ‘We have a plurality of views.’ ... ‘As Bishops we remain committed to listening and walking together to the maximum possible degree, despite our deep disagreement on these issues.’

A goal of plurality in unity is not, perhaps, a surprising one for any church to aim for, let alone forty of them meeting together from vastly different contexts. To those of us who advocate for the full inclusion of LGBTI+ people within the church community (as a contemporary example of allowing the greater law of God's love to prevail), but who are also realistic about the height of the barriers to such inclusion in different parts of the Anglican world, a goal of plurality in unity should offer hope for a way forward.

The Lambeth Conference opened a window onto a kind of internal ecumenism developing within the Anglican Communion on this issue, as well as within the

Church of England itself (an outcome to which the *Living in Love and Faith* process is clearly pointing). For there is more that unites us than divides us, even if we can't agree about this question. And if we stop to think about it, unity in diversity is how God made creation, including human beings, while plurality in unity is of the very nature of the divine: we worship a God who is Three in One.

It is this God to whom, in each generation, we must entrust the future of the Church and all its members. For in the end it's about God and not all about us. The God who is Love, beyond us, beside us and within us, now and for eternity, to whom be the glory.

Amen.