

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

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

**Sermon – Christmas Eve - Midnight Mass**

**24<sup>th</sup> December 2021**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

I remember once hearing a radio announcer say in a mock serious voice on 22<sup>nd</sup> June: 'the nights are starting to draw in now'. His colleague gave a howl of protest. For my part, I always find it a relief to get beyond 21<sup>st</sup> December, the day that contains the shortest amount of daylight in the northern hemisphere. I know a number of people who suffer from SAD (seasonal affective disorder), on whom the dark afternoons and evenings of winter have a particularly strong impact. It can be a really difficult time. It's no coincidence that the early church began to celebrate the coming of Christ, the Light of the World, at the darkest point of the year.

We also use the concept of darkness figuratively to describe things that make us sad. We speak of living through dark times, of dark behaviour, dark experiences. This Christmas, once more much of the world has been plunged into uncertainty, along with its close relative anxiety, about spiralling case numbers in the pandemic, the prospect of overwhelmed medical services, renewed restrictions on the ability to travel, the inability to be with loved ones whom we long to see and hold again. It's hard to hold onto hope, to a sense that all will be well. We find ourselves asking, like a child shortly after beginning a long journey, 'Are we nearly there yet?'

The writers of the Scriptures, too, understood the figurative power of references to light and darkness. The Book of Genesis begins with the words: 'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. ... Then God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light. And God saw that the light was good'. Beginning his Gospel account, St John uses similar imagery: 'In the beginning was the Word ... All things came into being through him ... What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'

If I were only allowed to take one Bible sentence to a desert island, it would be that last one. It is the most powerful statement I know of why it makes sense to go to church on Sundays. It is the most powerful statement I know of the goodness and resilience built deep into the heart of creation, the assurance of a God who knows the human condition from within, including all its sorrows, and who holds onto us through and beyond them. The most powerful statement of hope for a world in pain.

As this year draws to a close, the problems of the world seem to threaten to overwhelm us – the climate emergency, the effect of ever-growing economic imbalances, the persistence of violence and injustice, quite apart from the ravages of the pandemic. The problems are just too big, too complex and too urgent for us to be able to glimpse how they might be solved. Yet as John the Evangelist understood and was inspired to write, the defining event in human history was the coming of the light of Christ. Two thousand years ago the writer glimpsed that subsequent events of human history would come to be seen by this light, which would shine even in the darkest places. That it would light the

way for human communities to become kinder, that it would inspire societies to become more generous than a focus on narrow self-interest and survival of the fittest would otherwise bring about. Even though in our European societies relatively few still profess an active Christian faith, the heritage of our Christian ancestors is such that people still believe it matters that the hungry are fed, the poor are cared for, children are educated, the sick have access to healthcare, and the very young and very old receive nurture and care. John saw that the light of Christ's life, teaching, death and resurrection would continue to point the way to abundant life, scattering fear and bringing hope even in the face of disaster, long after the eye witnesses to his story were gone. That's why he introduced his account of the story by painting it on a cosmic canvas.

John points also to the effect of our response. Christina Rossetti, in her carol 'In the bleak midwinter', describes it as the giving of our hearts. What Christmas fundamentally celebrates is people being willing to give their hearts in response to the God who seeks them out, the God who in some mysterious way we experience as personal, as a claim on our hearts. The baby in the manger (who does not feature in St John's account, only in Luke's and Matthew's) is one without power or protection. The only power he does have is to draw out of people what is in them, the longing to love and care for the vulnerable. Loving and caring for the vulnerable is what the adult Jesus spent much of his ministry teaching people to do.

The community that Jesus creates around him is one which challenges the barriers that prevent us from responding to one another. It was, and is, a community based on a common willingness to respond to God and to one another. All over the world, despite lockdowns and pandemic restrictions,

communities like this one have formed online to do just that – or, as John would put it, to ‘testify to the light’. For the church is a community that, whilst still a human one, is also a community that carries (however falteringly and however often it fails) God’s vision for the world and for humanity. John doesn’t pull any punches when he writes about the kinship of Jesus which such a community can bring about: ‘But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become the children of God.’

That’s an extraordinary claim. But the reason John makes it is his belief that there is something at work which we barely understand but sometimes glimpse, in the goodness and resilience we discern at the heart of creation, something that has been pouring itself out for ever, which no darkness can ever overcome. Something pouring itself out for *us*, without limit and without end. Light from light. Or, in John’s words, ‘fullness [from which] we have all received, grace upon grace.’

Light from light. That’s the immeasurable gift we are given at Christmas - without limit and without end. Thanks be to God.

Amen.