

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 17th Sunday after Trinity

26th September 2021

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

It's good for a Chaplain to go away sometimes. Not only have I enjoyed visiting England for the first time in nearly two years, catching up with family members and friends, but I have also been reminded what a wonderful set of colleagues I have here, who have looked after the chaplaincy so well and so generously during that time.

Such knowledge is part of what Moses discovers in our Old Testament reading today from the Book of Numbers. The ancient Israelites have been freed from slavery, led out of Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea, given water gushing from a rock and fed manna in the desert. Yet all they seem able to do is complain. (I hasten to add that any parallels with the chaplaincy end there!) They don't like the manna, instead getting nostalgic about cucumbers, melons and garlic, somehow forgetting the slavery that accompanied them. They don't look around them and give thanks to God for being alive at all. They are, in fact, still behaving mentally like slaves, not taking responsibility for themselves or their responses to what has happened - just complaining.

Moses feels overwhelmed. 'I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.' But he is given the key advice to appoint some colleagues. His responsibility begins to be shared among the people, equipping them for the freedom to which God has called them. Seventy are chosen to share the burden of responsibility that goes with freedom. Moses learns that no one is indispensable – instead, he learns to recognise the gifts in those around him and see the larger context in which they are all set.

In Christian terms, this is about de-centring. For Christ is always the centre, not us. Recognising we are not alone is what we call church. And the church, too, needs to be aware that its efforts are not the be all and end all. It sometimes feels as though a considerable amount of its time is spent trying to shore up diminishing resources – a sense of which has been accentuated during the pandemic. But the church is part of a larger story which we call the Kingdom. The Kingdom's boundaries stretch far beyond those of the church, and when we look outwards and see all its activity, it can be liberating. For the Gospel always moves outwards, and so must we.

These are good things to keep in mind as we approach the autumn. Within the chaplaincy we are beginning several new initiatives. Tonight we are holding our first evening service in Aix-en-Provence, in a building kindly made available to us by the Eglise Protestante Unie de France. In three weeks, all being well, we will be holding our first service in Manosque, hosted by the same church. There is new energy, new purpose, a commitment to welcoming new people in. There is much work to be done, but our readings today are a reminder that we must move forward trusting in God's abundance, rather than held back by our own sense of scarcity. In terms of moving outwards, we also hope to begin focusing more on our community engagement – standing where Jesus did, with the

dispossessed and marginalised. It's one of the things mentioned in the new vision and mission statement which we will be adopting in the autumn.

Our worship materials in Aix tonight will be based on those of the Iona Community, which describes itself as 'a Christian ecumenical community working for peace and social justice, rebuilding of community and the renewal of worship'. The Iona Community literally grew out of a church that was in ruins, when in 1938 George Macleod (a Church of Scotland minister working in a deprived area of Glasgow during the Depression) took a party of unemployed craftsmen and trainee clergy to the Island of Iona off the coast of Scotland, where they set about restoring the monastic quarters of the abbey. From those small beginnings, Macleod's vision led to a movement that has inspired people across the world.

The church in each generation needs to find new purpose. Our reading from the Letter of James picks up this theme – each one of us has been granted a share of God's healing power, through Christ and the Holy Spirit, and our task is to use it for the good of others. It is no longer someone else's responsibility, but ours.

Our Gospel reading explores in more depth this responsibility for caring, in a radically inclusive vision. It comes just after Jesus's second prediction to his disciples that he must suffer and die. The disciples had found someone who was not part of their immediate group healing people in his name, and had tried to stop them. Jesus rebukes them with the words: 'whoever is not against us is for us', emphasising that if they try to stop others believing because of their own narrow vision of what it means to belong to Christ, it would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone round their necks. They are urged instead to hold on to the radical demands of the Kingdom, resisting the temptation to turn in upon themselves, adopt a bunker mentality and become

factional and divisive. They are to 'have salt in themselves, and be at peace with one another'. Salt was essential not only for seasoning, but also for preservation and healing. If you rubbed it on a wound, it burned, but it also healed, bringing peace.

The reading continues with a collection of Jesus's sayings in which he holds up a mirror to other aspects of our human behaviour. He urges us to be honest with ourselves about the things that separate us from God, which can, if we are not careful, lead us to a place that can feel like a living hell. One theologian¹ has described hell as 'the terrible weariness and incredible boredom of a life focused entirely on itself'. What metaphorical stumbling blocks are there for us today that do this? What is the metaphorical 'hand', 'foot', 'eye' in our own lives that keeps us from the fullness of life promised by Christ?

Our hands are the things that do work – is our work, or the way we do it, compatible with Christ's vision for a life lived to the full? Our feet are the things that take us towards a destination – are our goals in keeping with those of the kingdom of God? And where are our eyes focused? Of the things that compete for our attention, how often do they look towards the example of Christ? Jesus reminds us that our acts and omissions have an impact on others. He ends with the striking reference to salt losing its saltiness, that quality which Christians are meant to have – to be salt to the world. What are the ways we fail to stand up for the values of the gospel, we who identify as followers of Christ?

If everything were left to us, things would start to feel a bit bleak. But the Gospel we celebrate is one of hope in spite of the worst of human behaviour. It tells of how God takes the raw material of our human lives and transfigures it. Just when hope seems impossible, God's power to transform is revealed. Our deep-

¹ Daniel Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding*.

rooted tendency to complain, never feeling that we have enough, always wishing for something better in the past or in the future, rarely being able to rest in the present moment and give thanks to God, is redeemed by God's grace.

We are reminded of that assurance in the Collect set for this week. Echoing words of St Augustine, it says this:

Almighty God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you: pour your love into our hearts and draw us to yourself, and so bring us at last to your heavenly city where we shall see you face to face.

Our restlessness, our dissatisfaction, is ultimately something only God can satisfy. We must wait until the next life to experience it to the full. Meanwhile Jesus offers us a way of living well in this world, if only we will learn from him. For we *will* find our rest in God and, until we do, we know to whom we should go.

Amen.