

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – First Sunday of Lent

28th February 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Poor old Peter. Always getting it wrong. When your best friend calls you 'Satan' you know you're in trouble. Only a minute ago Peter was telling Jesus that his friends had understood he was the Messiah. What happened?

Mark doesn't tell us what Peter said next, just that he 'rebuked' Jesus for warning them that his forthcoming confrontation with the authorities would end in suffering and death. Peter was presumably saying this didn't have to be: 'you'll be all right, you are the Messiah, we will fight for you.' But his words must have reminded Jesus of the tempter in the wilderness, inviting him to exercise the wrong sort of power. Hence his severe reaction.

There were many pressures on Jesus to do things differently. All around him were minor insurrections against the occupying forces of the Roman Empire, notably by the Zealots, of whom Luke says that one of the twelve apostles, Simon, was a member. So there's a political dimension to the conversation with Peter. Looked at from this point of view, 'taking up your cross' means not taking the course of action of the local political and religious authorities - not being

subservient to Rome. Neither is it taking the Zealots' way of violent insurrection. It is the non-violent path of active resistance and the creation of an alternative society within the apparent dominance of Rome.

Non-violent resistance where people are oppressed is still the church's vocation – forming an alternative community that is about reconciliation, about receiving the stranger as a gift. Facing the consequences of standing for that alternative community and being prepared to suffer for it. Martin Luther King called it 'the beloved community', and he was shot for proclaiming it. Many modern martyrs who have given their lives for the Christian faith have done the same. Like them, we will never know when we may be called upon to take up the cross. We just hope we will never have to pay so high a price.

This scene in the Gospel also tells us something about ourselves. It's partly about how we face up to reality. In our Lent course, we are discussing Rowan Williams's book of reflections on *Faith, hope and love in a time of pandemic*. Some of us have been admitting to ourselves and each other how difficult we have found facing up to reality in the pandemic – clinging to the thought it may be over soon. The serial optimist Boris Johnson has just told the British people they can all go on holiday in June (or at least that's what easyJet heard from his speech last week). Last summer he said it would all be over by Christmas. There's a degree of denial everywhere, including in ourselves.

But in learning to face reality, in all aspects of our lives, we can begin to grow beyond denial and useless anger. That's another meaning of 'taking up your cross'. We are better placed to do something about the reality that faces us. What we do will differ, depending on the nature of the problem. In a pandemic,

it means taking responsible action and learning to be patient. With an addiction, it means accepting there is a problem and addressing it with appropriate help. In dealing with a dysfunctional relationship, it means having honest conversations, bringing things to a head or, if necessary, to an end. But not avoiding the reality.

What about 'denying ourselves'? Is that just about giving things up for Lent? Well, that's never a bad thing if it helps us contemplate all that Jesus gave up for us. But it's a wider concept. It's about not making ourselves the centre of everything, but learning instead to see our lives in the wider context of God in Christ. Realising there's a bigger story than our own and leaving our preoccupations with self behind to live it. Abraham did that literally, migrating in response to God's prompting, trusting what sounded like incredible promises. In doing so, he became the ancestor of faith for all of us, as Paul recognised in his Letter to the Romans. It's about believing in promise and having faith, which in turn leads to hope. Hope is what we need more than anything at the moment.

And yet we find Jesus saying, 'those who want to save their life will lose it'. That doesn't sound very hopeful. But those words tell us something else about ourselves. They ask us where we are investing our energies, our love, our resources. Do we do so in things that are eternal, or things that are temporary? It is worth spending some time during Lent making an inventory of that for ourselves. We might be surprised to find how simple God's call upon us is. The thing that is eternal is love, and everything else flows from that: the other 'fruits of the Spirit' that Paul lists elsewhere - joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5.22-23) - and more. If as individuals we can manage to focus on those qualities together, we

may end up as Martin Luther King's 'beloved community', supporting one another through thick and thin.

I was reminded of an example of this when choosing our Communion anthem today. The composer, Richard Shephard, died last weekend after a long illness. Forty years ago he lived in Salisbury, where he sang in the cathedral choir. My family were also living there at the time so I got to know him a little. Shephard's setting of Thomas Campion's poem 'Never weather beaten sail' was written in response to tragedy. A friend of his was diagnosed with an inoperable cancer and died not long afterwards, leaving a young family. Her husband was one of Shephard's colleagues. The events drew the whole cathedral community together in love and concern, Christian community at its best. Shephard was asked to write the anthem for her funeral, and it seems fitting to play it for him today.

The words, written four hundred years ago, may seem surprisingly direct to our modern ears. But if you have ever accompanied someone through a terminal illness, you may have heard or even felt a version of Campion's prayer. Yet when I heard Shephard's setting again this week, what struck me most about it was how both words and music speak of a profound hope and trust in God. They also offer a clue to how death might look from God's end of the telescope.

And it struck me that, globally, we are not doing enough of that at the moment in the face of this pandemic – holding on to the hope offered to us in God. We are daily given reminders of the need to live cautiously, fearfully, to live locked-in lives. But where are we mentally investing our energies, our love and our resources? In the things of eternity, or just the things of the next day?

If we can find it in us to invest in the things of eternity, we will live more fruitfully through what can feel like fruit-less days. When I put this anthem in the service

sheet, I initially thought it had nothing to do with the second Sunday in Lent. I now suspect it has quite a lot to do with it. For it's about how we face death and, if we can trust that God is holding the other end of the telescope, how that in turn frees us to live the gospel now. Living freely despite all the physical constraints we are under. Risking everything in service of the values that last for ever, beyond the concerns of the day. Setting our minds on divine things, not human things. And, in doing so, learning to be free.

Easter will teach us that all over again. Preparation for Easter's eternal promise is what this season of Lent is for.

Amen.