

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 13th Sunday after Trinity

29th August 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

It has been heart-breaking this week watching news coverage of the airlift from Kabul of Afghan and foreign citizens, following the sudden takeover of power by Taliban forces, arriving in the city with all the confidence of a superior military force and an unshakeable belief in their particular brand of Islamic conservatism. I was struck by a TV interview with one member of the incoming forces, probably in his mid-thirties, smiling at the camera as he explained how life would from now on be different for women in Afghanistan. There was something chilling about the look in his unsmiling eyes.

There is always something chilling about religious fundamentalism - of whatever brand, in whatever place and of whatever faith. It is cold-hearted, brooks no discussion and is oblivious of the impact on other human beings of what it regards as the purity of its message. Yet people seek security in fundamentalism, for it offers them a clear identity. There is something seductive about offers of simplicity, whether by religious leaders or politicians.

In religion, a fundamentalist approach relieves people of individual responsibility from applying their minds, particularly to scriptural texts, encouraging them to take refuge in so-called certainties that obscure the inherent uncertainties we encounter when we engage properly with writings that are hundreds or thousands of years old.

Some churches put the following words – or something like them - on their websites: ‘We preach a Bible-based Christianity’. Well, don’t we all? But in order to understand the rich texture of the sixty-six different books that make up the Bible, you need to ask a lot of questions. To begin with, you need to ask the ‘who, what, why, when, where’ questions when looking at any particular biblical passage. Who was it written for? Who was it written by? What is the nature of the passage – history? law? teaching? poetry? story? parable? Why was it written - exaggeration to make a point? a letter written to settle a particular quarrel of the early church, remote from our 21st century context? When was it written? Where was it written?

The answers to such questions are often fascinating, but they are rarely simple. Over-simplification in matters of religion can cause damage to the very people to whom its leaders owe a duty of care. It tends to ride roughshod over groups of people, particularly minorities. It likes to control and is fearful of difference. This week, the fate of women and girls in Afghanistan in the months and years ahead, as well as minority groups such as those who identify as LGBTI+, is a source of deep concern to many in the west as we watch the events unfold. It is a reminder, if one were needed, that we must never take our own freedoms for granted.

Jesus was alert to the dangers of religious conservatism and had no patience with it. Our Gospel reading this morning tells of how a group of Pharisees and scribes have come from Jerusalem, expressing disapproval when they find religious rules being disregarded in the provinces. They ask Jesus to explain how he can allow his followers to ignore the traditions of their faith by not washing their hands before they eat. It is worth recalling that the Pharisees' particular focus was on enforcing the rules of their faith that concerned ritual purity. They had a sense that if only people had been better at complying with them, they would not have been invaded by the armies of the Roman Empire – much as, six hundred years earlier, their ancestors had come to understand that they had lost the promised land and been exiled in Babylon because they had drifted away from God.

Jesus, ever alert to the damage inflicted by the narrow legalism of his religious critics, replies by quoting Isaiah 29, in which the prophet warns the ancient Israelites that their worship had become a vain show and its doctrines based on human invention. Jesus then calls those around him to hear his answer to the Pharisees' complaint about his disciples breaking the food laws. He says that nothing that goes into a person's stomach will defile them, but only what comes from their heart. He reminds them, and through them us, that faith is properly located in our beliefs, desires, thoughts and intentions, and the actions that result from them.

Two thousand years after Jesus's conversation with the Pharisees, an obsessive focus on purity codes in religion, which still results in a narrow legalism, often emerges when religious leaders feel under pressure. We saw it on display in Kabul this week. We see it in Christian circles too, particularly when whole

categories of people start being excluded from the full life of the church. And when that happens, we need to be alert to it, just as Jesus was alert to it in his time.

Last week I took a wedding blessing in the Luberon, in which I preached about the power of love. As I walked away, a woman said to me: 'I wish more people would say that the Christian faith is about love.' It is sobering to discover how poorly the Church is perceived by those outside it. Within the Church of England, part of the problem in recent decades is that hardline conservatives have for too long dominated certain agendas.

We will have an opportunity to explore some of these issues in more depth in the autumn, when we will be running a course on the material published by the Church of England last year entitled *Living in Love and Faith*. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York have asked every parish and every chaplaincy in the Church of England to study this material and to send in feedback about it. It is about the Church's teaching on 'identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage', including the wide range of views that exist within that teaching. Unless you have been living on another planet, you will know that these issues have deeply divided the Church for around thirty years.

The *Living in Love and Faith* course offers a unique opportunity. The material does not seek to reach conclusions, and it acknowledges that there is likely to be a range of views on some of the subject matter within any church community. It also emphasises that such range of views must be honoured in the discussions. But it offers a unique opportunity, because I cannot think of any other matter of doctrine within living memory - possibly within the history of the church - on

which those who sit in the pews have actually been invited to give their views to the Archbishops. It is an opportunity that needs to be taken, particularly for a chaplaincy like All Saints, where we welcome people irrespective of the many differences that make up human identity, including gender and sexual identity. We see such an inclusive welcome as an outworking of the Gospel. But there is a vocal minority in the Church of England who have tried to prevent that voice from being heard. I hope you will find time to engage with the course. We will send out more information about it nearer the time.

These issues are also touched upon in the Letter of James, our Epistle reading this morning. He urges that what matters is what we do about this faith of ours - the kindness that we show, the loving service we perform. We must be 'doers of the word and not merely hearers'. As the woman at the wedding blessing said last week: 'I wish more people would say that the Christian faith is about love.'

How the perceptions which underlie that comment would have grieved Jesus, two thousand years on. When he was asked what mattered most about the faith tradition he had inherited, he replied without hesitation: 'Love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself.' He said nothing about excluding a neighbour because of any difference to do with their identity. On the contrary, the more they were excluded by the religious authorities, the more he welcomed them in.

Amen.