

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – All Saints' Day

30th October 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd James Johnston, Chaplain

I wonder if you can hear them?

The current level of dysfunction in parliamentary life, both in France and the UK, is giving the media a field day. Everything we read or hear is laced with doom. This winter is going to be the 'worst anyone can remember'. There will be shortages of (according to the focus of the commentator) electricity, gas, food, petrol, hospital beds, doctors, nurses, dentists, teachers, pharmacists, microprocessors. It has brought a whole new dimension to 'doom-scrolling', as unlimited articles roll by telling us that things have never been so bad.

It is undoubtedly true that serious problems lie ahead. Both the cost of living crisis and the future economic outlook are particularly worrying. The COP27 summit will bring more bad news about the climate emergency. The multiple threats posed by the conflict in Ukraine are felt across the world, most of all by those directly suffering the effects of warfare. These are deeply challenging times.

And yet. Something else also happens at this time of year. Into the gloom erupts a dazzling procession of light, colour, sound, story, legend, courage, outrageousness, fierce integrity and improbable glory that we call the Communion of Saints. A procession of people who were vital, outspoken, determined, awkward and, often in the minds of those they encountered, not suitable company to keep. I suspect many of us tend to think of saints in terms of a still piety, beautiful in art and stained glass, conveying a sense of being impossible to live up to. Perhaps we need to rethink that.

The one thing the saints didn't waste time doing was doom-scrolling. They were far too busy living. Getting to the heart of things, searching out the deepest meaning of what it is to be human and to live with integrity. The saints break in on our reveries of how difficult times are now. They bring their own histories of war, persecution and plague, of sacrifice, justice and healing, and they encourage us to live life counter-culturally as followers of Christ. As one modern commentator has put it, 'Saints are human beings who live their lives in such a way that you think 'I'll have what she's having' '¹. Intensely alive, accepting with both hands Christ's offer of life in all its fullness, even though many of them suffered and died for what they stood for.

When we say in the Creed that we believe in the Communion of Saints, we are acknowledging that these men and women are our companions, assuring us that the road we walk, with all its challenges, is the road they have walked before us and that we are not alone.

¹ Lucy Winkett, *Reading the Bible with your Feet* (2021).

The saints are not only the older ones - apostles, early martyrs and figures from the medieval tradition. There are many modern saints too. Examples from the last hundred years are too numerous to mention, but any list would include Oscar Romero (the Archbishop of El Salvador who spoke out against oppression and was shot while celebrating Mass in 1980), Maximilian Kolbe (the Polish Franciscan friar who in 1941 volunteered to die in place of a stranger at Auschwitz because the stranger had a wife and children) and Edith Cavell (the British nurse executed for helping captured soldiers escape in First World War Belgium, tending the injured on both sides of the conflict, who died saying she must have no hatred or bitterness for anyone). And, closer to home, Arnaud Beltrame, the gendarme who in 2018 took the place of a hostage in a supermarket shooting in Carcassonne, dying in the subsequent negotiations with the gunman.

Then there are what are known as the 'ordinary saints', those who have simply lived out their baptism by being an influence for good on those around them. You will know who your own 'ordinary saints' have been. Transparent to the grace of God, open to the renewing, forgiving and affirming spirit of Christ. We celebrate them too on this day, and will name some when we come to our prayers of intercession, amongst the loved ones we will remember on All Souls' Day this Wednesday.

Saints are those who make us think 'yes, that's what God requires of us'. Like the prophet Micah, who completed that sentence with the words: 'to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God'. (Micah 6.8) They often model the beatitudes we heard in our Gospel reading from St Luke this morning.

Luke's beatitudes – those sentences of Jesus that begin with the words 'Blessed are' – are different from the ones in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew's appear in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus has gone up a mountainside to teach. In Luke, Jesus has come down from a mountain where he has been praying, coming among the people in need. Luke the physician, is preoccupied with the relief of suffering. His beatitudes are about a community of followers standing with the dispossessed, the marginalised, the grieving. Practising the presence of Christ where the world is in pain.

For Luke, faith begins with compassion and care, not a system of belief. He knows well that if people go and do something for people in greater need than they are, they will discover that they receive more than they give. That's something which 'ordinary saints' are good at. And today, our Patronal Festival, is a good day to give thanks for them and all they have given us.

It's been suggested that there are two things in particular which mark out saints, both of which give them freedom. One is holiness, that focus on the inner life that brings us closer to God in the ordinary business of living. Saints don't spend their lives wishing things were different. They start from where they are and find meaning and purpose in that. It gives them freedom to act.

The second thing that marks out saints is their ability to live in the dimension of the eternal. A few weeks ago I visited the room outside Saint-Rémy-de-Provence where the artist Vincent Van Gogh lived and worked for a year. When asked why he painted as he did, he said it was because he wanted to show that human beings had something of the eternal about them: 'I want to paint people with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolise, and which I seek to convey by the radiance ... of my colouring'.

The point about saints living in the dimension of the eternal is that the fear of death is removed by their freedom to accept it. They live the same life as everyone else, but they march to the beat of a different drum. They are earthed, but they hear too the heartbeat of heaven as they move through this world with love, saying (in the words of Dag Hammarskjold, former Secretary General of the United Nations):

‘For all that has been, thanks;
To all that shall be, yes!’

Glimpsing these things asks us: how might we allow the spirit of Christ to dwell in us? How might we find wholeness and a sense of the eternal? Maybe we could become more extravagant - with our patience, our forgiveness, our love? There’s nothing to stop us trying. It’s why we give thanks today for that extraordinary procession we call the Communion of Saints, as they invade our consciousness with the sound of their song in the holy and eternal light of heaven.

I wonder if you can hear them?

Amen.