

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 12th Sunday after Trinity – 30th August 2020

Service at All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

It's a week since we heard Peter utter those words in response to Jesus's question who he thought he was: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God', followed by Jesus's affirmation of his friend: 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. ... You are *petros*, and on this rock I will build my church ... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven'. But immediately afterwards in Matthew's account we find today's Gospel reading, in which Jesus is suddenly saying to Peter: 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me.' What happened?

From the moment his closest followers identify him as the Messiah, Jesus is at pains to explain to them that his vocation is one that will involve rejection, suffering and death. Peter is disturbed by this, probably for a combination of reasons. Perhaps the impact on his own life of knowing Jesus is such that he cannot imagine that impact not being felt by others, so the idea of a wholesale rejection in Jerusalem seems not only unlikely but something to be resisted. Perhaps a part of him still clings to the widely held understanding that messiahship will involve political salvation, combined with a renewal of the ancestral faith and the overthrow of the hated Roman occupier. Perhaps part

of his response is simply what anyone would say to a friend who predicts their own imminent death: 'God forbid! This must never happen to you.'

Whatever the combination of reasons, Peter must think he is being supportive to Jesus by what he says, yet he gets an extreme reaction. For Jesus, Peter's words are an echo of the temptations he fought off in the wilderness, when he withdrew after his baptism by John in order to work out what his vocation was to mean. Throughout his ministry, Jesus resists any interpretation of his identity as Messiah being viewed in terms of status, power and wealth, those drivers of identity in the world around him. He does not want people even to know that he is the Messiah until they are able to understand how different his mission is from their expectations. His notion of messiahship has nothing to do with the politico-military figure which popular belief had come to expect, but draws much more on the figure of the suffering servant in the prophecy of Isaiah. Jesus is well aware of the temptations of status and power which also affect his followers. But he knows too that they will learn from his walking the way of the cross, and that after his lifetime their mission will be to follow in those steps, as they walk the way of life in the power of his Spirit.

The African concept of *ubuntu* reflects an ancient understanding of what it means to be human: 'I am because we are.' The individual cannot exist alone. We owe our existence to others, including those of past generations as well as those amongst whom we live. We are part of a whole. The community creates the individual, and the individual depends on the group. We see this at work in our own communities, though we don't have a word for it like *ubuntu*. 'No man is an island entire of itself', said John Donne.

The conversation between Jesus and Peter is one of those moments when identity is understood between two people. Each shares his insights with the other, affirms the other's identity and prepares the other for the ministry which lies ahead. Jesus and Peter help each other to assume their rightful identities. This is the principle expressed by *ubuntu*: 'I am because we are.' Our anthem today, Alan Paton's Prayer from South Africa, speaks from that insight. Jesus knows Peter will grow and face the truths of what must come, ultimately developing the strength to found and maintain the church which will bear Jesus's name.

Jeremiah understood that a life of faith is not a life without struggle. His vocation was to proclaim unwelcome truths, and he suffered deeply for it. Yet God promised to be with him through it, a sustaining presence through the time of trial. It's the same promise that is made to anyone who bears faithful witness through opposition. 'They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the Lord.' It's something the disciples finally understood in the light of the resurrection.

This week I moved into a new apartment. As ever, there were frustrations – things promised and not done, small things seeming out of proportion, big things seeming insurmountable, culminating in the usual promise to oneself never to do this again. Against that background it was particularly salutary for me to read Paul's words in our epistle today. The passage from his Letter to the Romans is a wonderful reminder of the behaviours to which we are called as followers of Christ. 'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ... If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.'

‘Do not repay anyone evil for evil.’ Paul’s words echo those of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. ‘But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’. In my former life as a lawyer I once had a particularly bruising encounter with another member of the profession. That evening I was ruminating on the conversation, not knowing how to unload the sense of hurt. I needed to sleep but couldn’t unwind. Then I remembered the words from Matthew’s Gospel which say (in the King James version): ‘Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you’. So I did, and the strangest thing happened. The hurt evaporated, I had some sense of the woundedness of the person who had wounded me, and I felt completely at peace, all within minutes. I was aware that I had tapped into something much stronger than myself.

‘Do not repay anyone evil for evil.’ How much the world needs to be reminded of that. ‘Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.’ Paul was urging his readers to transform habits and attributes current in his time, which are in practice as current in ours. What Paul is describing are nothing less than the attributes that go, and come, with walking the way of the cross. For the cross is the ultimate expression of overcoming evil with good. Through it nothing and no one can do us harm. As our offertory hymn puts it, the cross is:

‘The balm of life, the cure of woe,
the measure and the pledge of love,
the sinner’s refuge here below,
the angels’ theme in heaven above’.

Amen.