

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 14th Sunday after Trinity

1st September 2024

All Saints' Marseille

Jane Quarmby, Licensed Lay Minister

Do you have any traditions in your family? Lots of us do, especially around Christmas – in the Quarmby family, pork pie for breakfast is a favourite. A lot of traditions are based around food in celebration. We have Christmas cake, Christmas pudding, mince pies, then there's pancakes and chocolate at Easter, Harvest suppers in Autumn. Some traditions go back centuries, others are relatively new, like singing Christmas carols and decorating our houses with fir trees.

If we leave our native country we tend to take our traditions with us - although I have yet to get to grips with a Christmas tree and a barbecue lunch on the beach on Christmas Day in New Zealand with the sun blazing and everyone in shorts. In Leicester, the large Indian community have a big celebration for Diwali, the festival of light, when the streets are lit up. In several cities the Caribbean communities hold their exuberant and colourful carnivals. Closer to home here in France, the expat community in the Dordogne now host Open Gardens, just as in England.

Somehow when you are far from home, holding onto your much loved traditions becomes more important. It's a way of keeping your identity, holding on to something well known and comfortable.

It becomes even more important when your country has been invaded and is under foreign rule and foreign laws.

That was the background to today's Gospel. Occupied by Roman troops, governed by people who worshipped foreign gods and idols, it became vital for the Jews to hang on to their way of life, to differentiate themselves from the occupiers of their country who ruled so cruelly. They had a strict set of laws or regulations which should be followed by devout Jews to distinguish themselves from foreigners. Washing your hands in this context comes

to have a double meaning – it’s always a good idea to wash your hands when handling food to stop infection and disease – but the Pharisees were insisting on a ritualistic washing of hands and were thrilled to finally catch out Jesus and his followers for not following the prescribed law.

But Jesus makes the point that manmade laws and tradition can blind you to God’s presence and word. So often people get caught up in tradition, in that whole bunch of thistles called “But we’ve always done it like that”. There are many and varied examples in our churches, ranging from not decorating with red and white flowers which dates back to the First World War when it reminded people all too clearly of blood and bandages, to the ringing of a bell before the service starts. It’s not to give an angel its wings as some would say, but goes back to when churches had no seats for the ordinary folk who, standing around, talked amongst themselves and had no intention of stopping until the bell was heard above the cacophony. Woe betide the newcomer who sits in someone else’s pew or, *quelle horreur*, the new church warden who suggests taking out the pews altogether to make room for social activities or toilet facilities. Or the vicar who suggests changing the time of the morning service.

It's as well to remind ourselves regularly that God probably isn't at all interested in the pews, the flowers, the timing of services, whether or not you have enough mince pies for Christmas or any of the other trivia that we get caught up in.

Tradition and manmade laws are just that – manmade. This is the point that Jesus was making – the laws about washing your hands and what you should and shouldn't eat are human laws. It's not what you put into your body that counts, because your body is supremely well designed to process it and expel it. It's what is in your heart, mind and behaviour that is important. Food isn't evil – but our thoughts and actions can be. To God, what is vital is that humans obey his laws, and Jesus came to re-enforce those laws. Love is the most important of all – love one another. It's not just 2000 years ago in a different world from ours that harm can come from manmade laws and traditions as they seep into the culture of a place. I read an interesting recent take on this from a young American pastor – see if it resonates anywhere with you:

“My 34 years as a white, upper-middle-class, average intelligence heterosexual Christian American male who has followed the rules, stayed out of trouble, and minded my own business, has resulted thus far in a good job, an incredible wife, and healthy children all under the roof of a large home in a safe, white, middle-class neighbourhood. And I earned it. I followed the rules, stayed out of trouble, and minded my own business. I played the game and so I get to enjoy my winnings.”

There's a but: "I hate hearing Jesus say that the whole time I've been so focused on following the rules and pursuing success, he's been doing amazing things for, with, and among people I'd worked hard to ignore or put down: people who were born with a different skin colour or a different gender attraction; people born into a different income bracket or a rougher neighbourhood; people born with bodies more susceptible to diseases of the flesh or the mind....."

On reflection now he says:

"I see the tears of countless youth contemplating suicide because they feel the weight of not fitting in at school.

I see the tears of mothers whose black children were killed either by police officers who were taught to assume they were dangerous, or from other youth who, for a myriad of reasons, knew they would never be accepted by society, so they play the game offered by gangs and drugs.

I see the tears of struggle from immigrant families who came to America by circumventing the legal process because they believed their families' livelihoods were worth the risk; only to find out that the people who had the fortune of being born here see them and treat them as drug dealers and pariahs of society.

I see the tears of Jesus as he was dying on the cross on the hill overlooking Jerusalem – the place where the rules were made and enforced; the same rules that condemned him and the people he had come to save. I see the tears he cried as he tried to show all of us rule-followers a more noble, beautiful, and just way to live."

Jesus was severely critical of those who bound others in rules of their making – he came to cut through them all and give us a simpler framework to follow. His main rule for us was to love one another, and he gave us only two rituals to follow – those of baptism and of the eucharist, of sharing bread and wine in his name. How hard should that be? Perhaps it's time we followed his laws, not our own. Time to focus on Jesus Christ, and his ways, not ours.

Amen.