

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 1st Sunday after Trinity

2nd June 2024

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Assistant Chaplain

When you hear the word Sabbath, what comes to mind first? Is it the day of holiness and rest observed by Jewish people, a break from the busyness of life, or perhaps a long list of 'don'ts'? You might also think of the Presbyterian, Methodist or Baptist tradition of associating Sunday rest and worship with a Christian application of the Sabbath.

As 2024 is an Olympic year, I cannot help but recall the story of the Scottish athlete and Christian missionary Eric Liddell: at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris, he won a gold medal in the 400m after refusing to compete in the heats of his favourite race, the 100m, because they were held on a Sunday. Instead, he chose to go and preach at the Scots Kirk.

Whether the concept of Sabbath is new to you or deeply ingrained in your upbringing, we must acknowledge that in today's fast-paced world, the idea of setting aside time for rest and reflection can seem both inviting and elusive. We cannot help but envy a little those who are faithful to such a discipline.

The Jewish Sabbath was and is a completely original institution. In Jesus's day, the Sabbath played a crucial role in establishing Jewish identity both within Palestine and beyond. From sundown on Friday until sunset on Saturday, Jews encouraged one another to enjoy a day of delight¹, worship the LORD², set aside ordinary work³, and engage in battle only in self-defence⁴. Jewish theologians often debated which activities were permissible on the Sabbath, prohibiting 39 actions.

¹ Nehemiah 8:9–12; Isaiah 58:13–14

² Isaiah 66:23; Ezekiel 46:3

³ Amos 8:5

⁴ 1 Maccabees 2:29–41

It began as a simple observance of the pattern of time that God followed in the creation of the world, according to the book of Genesis: after speaking the world into existence over a six-day period, God rested (*shabat* in Hebrew) on the seventh day, blessed it and set it apart from the other days⁵. However, as we heard in the reading from Deuteronomy, the Sabbath commandment was given as a gift to the newly freed Hebrews after their enslavement in Egypt. Even today, the Jewish prayer before and after the Sabbath meal includes the words: ‘Once we were slaves in Egypt, now we are free people.’ The Sabbath thus acknowledges and celebrates God’s redemptive activity and symbolises the commitment to a holy existence as a free people.

Can we grasp how revolutionary this commandment remains, even today? The Sabbath is not only a religious institution, a memorial to Creation, the day on which God himself rested, but, as theologian and philosopher Jonathan Sacks⁶ pointed out, it is also fundamentally a political institution, a tutorial in liberty. One day in seven, master and slave, employer and employee, the migrant, and even animals, are to experience unconditional freedom. On this day, all hierarchies and relationships of power are suspended, and the offer of rest is not based on merit but is an act of divine love and grace. The Sabbath offers a blueprint for human existence: the ordinary week reflects God’s time, with the Sabbath foreshadowing the day when the glory of God will fill the earth and humankind will enter God’s rest. A lesson that holds value even for the secular world, as Czech economist Tomáš Sedláček⁷ argues, encouraging us to create a pause in the relentless pursuit of ‘more’. Such a pause would allow us to celebrate what we have rather than obsess over what we lack.

Doesn’t all this evoke a bit more sympathy for the Pharisees and their insistence on impeccably honouring Sabbath, as even the prophets have decreed: ‘If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day, [...] I will make you ride on the heights of the earth [says the LORD]’⁸. The Church has a long tradition in caricaturing the Pharisees as self-righteous hypocrites. Yet, according to the 1st century Roman-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, Pharisees were esteemed by their Jewish contemporaries for “practising the highest ideals both in their way of living and in their discourse”⁹. They were regarded as upstanding, devout pillars of the community.

⁵ Genesis 2.2-3

⁶ *Radical Then, Radical Now*

⁷ *The Economics of Good and Evil*

⁸ Isaiah 15.13-14

⁹ *Antiquities*

No, the Pharisees were not wrong to uphold the Sabbath - they were absolutely right. But rightness alone is not love. Rightness is not compassion. Rightness does not fulfil the law. Time and time again, we see Jesus Christ overturning the rules established for proper observance. Each time he does so, he embodies his words as recorded in the Gospel: 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.'¹⁰

What better way than his to understand the purpose of the Sabbath? Hunger being satisfied, ailments being healed – a day of rest and a liberation from the tyranny of our needs, allowing people to remember and know the goodness, generosity and bounty of God.

What does the Pharisees' silence in response to Christ's question reveal? They have constructed a system of traditions and rules and implications of God's good and holy law, but they have lost sight of its true purpose. C.S. Lewis once remarked, "Nothing gives one a more spuriously good conscience than keeping rules, even if there has been a total absence of all real charity and faith."¹¹

How tolerant and loving are we toward those who defy or break the rules to proclaim and witness to God's realm? Toward those who block roadways out of love for God's creation, or protest against violence and injustice? Do we see Christ in their actions, or do we choose law over love, habit over creativity, and rules over compassion? Do we choose these because it is easier than bearing the unruly potency of love?

There is a detail in this story you may have overlooked. The man is healed, yet Jesus neither touched him nor spoke any words of healing. He simply asked the man to stretch out his hand, and the healing occurred. By doing this, Jesus upheld his Sabbath observance, not breaking the law in any way. Instead, Mark portrays Jesus as honouring the purpose of the Sabbath commandment and God's commitment to humanity's flourishing. What if we designated the Sabbath as a time when God reaches out to us and we reach out to God, creating healing and new life through this mutual reaching?

God's law is good - a law of love that aims to bring about life in abundance. In our story, Jesus demonstrates that the Sabbath is indeed the day to celebrate the God who gives life and sets people free. The religiosity of the institution, in its well-meaning concern to guard the things of God, misses the true heart of

¹⁰ Matthew 5.17

¹¹ *Letter to an American Lady*

God. Did you hear the heart of God today? Not calling for ritualised obedience but for heartfelt and compassionate action, for love that heals the sick, for love that sees and attends to the invisible and the untouchable.

Set time aside to remember God our creator and liberator, to remember others created and redeemed by him, and to acknowledge our need - and theirs - for restoration and refreshment. Receive God's gift of rest and pursue life.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 2nd Sunday after Trinity

9th June 2024

Oppède and Manosque

Jane Quarmby, Licensed Lay Minister

We humans need labels, don't we, so that we can neatly file things away in our understanding. It's hard for us to accept when something or someone can't be labelled and absorbed into our system. It's a basic human tendency -once something has a name then we know where to put it and what to do with it.

We see this illustrated very clearly in our Gospel reading from Mark. Firstly we have Mary and her family, the brothers and sisters of Jesus, trying to take him away from what he is doing – preaching and healing and casting out demons, so busy he and his followers don't even have time to eat because there are just so many people needing help. Why? Because he isn't now doing what they expect of him. He isn't living up to the label of oldest son and all that being the oldest son entails. He should be at home with them, playing an active role in their business, possibly even running it now. We don't know what happened to Joseph, but it's assumed that by the time Jesus reached 30, Joseph had died. Traditionally the oldest son would by now be the centre of the family, not running around with a bunch of oddbods from all walks of life. He's not a rabbi

or a teacher, he's a carpenter from a small town. They don't know what's going on and want him to pack all this daftness in and come home. One wonders why the people who have been closest to him all his life up until now, don't recognise what they have in their midst. Are they genuinely worried about him, thinking he's mad, or are they angry that he's not at home looking after them? Has Mary forgotten the angels who visited her and Joseph and told her how special a child Jesus would be? We'll never know.

If his family is cross, the religious teachers are even more put out by what he's doing. They can't explain Jesus. How does he know all that he teaches? He hasn't done their training or been accredited by them. He isn't part of their system, doesn't live like them or think like them, he is an outsider. They can't do what he can do – they can try to heal someone all day but it isn't going to happen – not like this man who is healing everyone who asks. To them he's someone who because he does not conform to their thinking or system, needs to be side-lined. He needs a label which makes him less important, easier to control or contain, easier to get rid of. Tom Wright in his book "Mark for Everyone" gives an example of how easily people give labels to each other and the consequences of doing that. He was watching a demonstration on the television news which quickly turned violent. He says "The close-up TV shots, and the recordings of what people were saying at the time, made it clear what had happened. The police had decided that the demonstrators were "scum". The demonstrators had decided that the police were "pigs". Once they had labelled them like that, they could do what they liked. They were no longer dealing with humans, but with animals, and dirty ones at that. Raise the stakes, stick a label on people, and then it doesn't matter what you do and who you hurt." Very quickly Tom Wright saw a demonstration turn into a pitched battle.

And it's still going on all over the world – labelling people because you fear them, don't understand them, or they aren't like you. We can all come up with examples of abuse – due to some-one's colour, where they were born, the colour of their skin, how they live, their sexuality, the list goes on. It starts early with children – like many others I was called "4 eyes" at school because I wore glasses and no-one else did in my class. But adults make it more serious as we see in so many ways and it inevitably leads to misery and violence.

The religious teachers couldn't think of anything better to say about Jesus than if he was doing all this casting out of demons then he must be one himself, in league with the devil. They couldn't look at him and his actions with open minds,

or accept that he was doing God's work, that his power of exorcism and healing was coming from God. It must, they decided, be a bad thing. Jesus is of course far too mature and clever to stoop to their childish name calling and destroys their argument with flawless logic. If they were right, then the devil was fighting himself and that can only end in disaster for the devil. It's the end of his kingdom. A nation at war with itself ends up destroying itself. If a family unit starts fighting amongst themselves, it's the end of that family unit as many divorces prove.

Unknown to themselves, though, the teachers have opened the way for Jesus to point out that although the devil is strong, someone has arrived who is even stronger. To burgle a strong man you must first overpower him and tie him up – and that is what Jesus is doing with the devil. Jesus is stronger and will defeat the devil even in his own house. He adds a warning though – if anyone labels the work of the Holy Spirit as being that of the devil, they are committing blasphemy. That will not be forgiven, and this is a very strong statement from Jesus. Today, as then, we need to decide for ourselves if Jesus was God made man, or not. Was he divine and human - or just someone from the history books?

Having dealt with the religious teachers, Jesus now must deal with his family - Mary and her other sons send Jesus a message which is relayed to him by the crowd, who alert him to the fact that his family is outside and looking for him. And Jesus's response is not what anyone would have expected. It's a surprise perhaps to us reading the passage now when he says that the crowd around him are his sisters and brothers, and anyone who does God's will! Doesn't he love and care about his mother and siblings? How could he put strangers before them? Nowadays we are used to families being separated by distance, moving a long way away from your parents and others in your family is quite usual these days – we are probably all good examples of this. Our family is scattered across the globe with members in Britain, France, Australia, and New Zealand. When children grow up, they usually leave home and strike out on their own. But this isn't the case in many non-Western cultures where the family stays together in a very tight knit community, living and working together, often in the same house. For those listening to Jesus it would have been shocking to leave your family like he had done, the height of disloyalty. No wonder the family thought him mad and wanted to drag him back home before he brought any more dishonour to the family name. But Jesus is on a very different path now, a path that will turn upside down the "normal" that everyone took for granted. He is creating a new family in God and is cutting through relationships and family ties.

This is a hard message from him – to leave your loved ones and follow him. It calls for difficult sacrifice. When we have a nice cosy life enjoying time spent with our children, grandchildren, parents, brothers and sisters, how many of us would be willing to give that up to follow the way of Jesus? To replace our loved ones with strangers who are perhaps very different from us? There are those who do, and I am in awe of those in our own congregation who have done just that. Three years ago we heard testimonies over Lent from people who are missionaries or charity workers in some of the most dangerous places in the world. Humbling stuff! Our chaplain Jamie gave up his life in England to come here and minister to us. Jesus and his call to follow him cuts right through our lives and our worlds. It's a massive challenge to us, to put God first in our lives, before everything and everyone else, to embrace a new family in God. But we all need to be loved, cherished, and welcomed – and that is what awaits us if we tap at God's door and ask to be adopted as one of his children.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 2nd Sunday after Trinity

9th June 2024

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Assistant Chaplain

Since last Sunday, we have entered the Church's Ordinary Time, which lasts until Advent. What does 'ordinary' mean in this context? Business as usual? Some prefer to call this 6-month period the 'season of living into the mission of the Church'. Indeed, you will find this 'season' punctuated by themes that highlight the mission and work of the Church. It should be for us a time to grow and live the life of Christ.

However, Ordinary Time begins this year with Jesus in conflict. Last Sunday, we heard how the Pharisees began conspiring with the Herodians to destroy Jesus. Today, we hear about conflict with scribes and authorities. In a few alarming

lines, we even hear about a possible conflict between Jesus and his own family. And we have only read from the first chapters in Mark's Gospel! It's a troubling and challenging passage. If you expect it to make your life decisions less painful and costly, to affirm your spiritual comfort zones, you will not find what you look for here.

In these times of polarization, fear of the other, of identities questioned and defended, when conflicts of any size and shape have become 'ordinary', we long to know there is still a place where we can always find refuge, a place we could call home. As poet Robert Frost said, 'home [is] the place where when you have to go, there they have to take you in'¹². It is the place where you are known and loved, where your identity has been shaped, and where you are reminded of who you really are.

Jesus is back home, in Nazareth, after inaugurating his ministry. His reputation has preceded him. Much has happened since the son of Joseph the carpenter left home. He has driven out unclean spirits, healed the sick, eaten with sinners, chosen twelve disciples, declared himself to be Lord of the Sabbath. The hope and yearning in people's hearts that he has stirred up is so formidable that they can't leave him alone. Yet, many find this as difficult to understand, as we do today. They try to rationalise Jesus, asserting that he is not a divinely empowered healer, but mentally deranged, or even possessed by an evil spirit, "the ruler of the demons."

This situation is more than enough to alarm his family who come to retrieve him and take him home, get him away from the public eye, to shield him. Undoubtedly, Jesus' family are moved by good intentions: they wish to protect him and are concerned that he has overstepped and may be harmed. Perhaps they are more aware of where his ministry may lead than he is.

I find Jesus's behaviour in this passage disconcerting. Does Jesus truly dismiss his familial bounds? He seems stern and austere. Instead of offering reassurance to his mother and siblings, he renounces their claims on his life, and 'replaces' them with a new family of his own choosing: 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

I believe this is a moment when Jesus faces some questions: 'Who am I? What am I? Who are my people? To whom do I belong? Where should my loyalties lie?' This is the juncture when he redefines his identity. Redefining one's identity

¹² *The Death of the Hired Man*

is a provocative act, and it almost always comes at a cost. This was likely a moment when Jesus said to himself, in the words of Thomas à Kempis, 'Do not care much who is with you and who is against you; but make it your greatest care that God is with you in everything you do.'¹³

Jesus pays a price higher than we can even fathom. Can you imagine the scene? Outside the house stand the so-called insiders - the family and also the religious authorities convinced of their understanding of God's will, rigid in their beliefs about how God's Spirit should manifest, and Jesus does not conform to their expectations. Inside the house are the outsiders - the outcasts, the tax collectors, the prostitutes. They are not concerned with dogma; they seek acceptance, forgiveness, and love. They yearn deeply for a sense of belonging. And in their midst is Jesus, declaring, "This is my family."

I tremble at the thought of Mary standing and waiting outside that house. At the same time, I imagine what it must have felt like to be within that house with Jesus that day, to be acknowledged by him as kin.

If this doesn't touch us, then we are not truly attentive. Jesus isn't advocating for superficial change here. He delves into the depths, challenging what is entrenched, institutionalised and systemic. Outside becomes inside, and inside becomes outside. This undeniably widens the margins and confronts those who complacently assume their connection with God. As we listen to this passage today, it prompts us to peer beyond our boundaries, sectarian divisions, our socio-economic standing, and even our beliefs, so that we recognise our kin. God summons us to expand our familial bonds in a manner as startling as it was to the initial audience of the Gospel of Mark.

Here is the Gospel truth: Jesus is not deranged; Jesus is not possessed by malevolent spirits. Instead, Jesus possesses the wisdom of God; Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit - and extends an invitation to all of us to share in that same wisdom and Spirit within the new family of those who do the will of God. This is still challenging for us as a church today. A church where divisions and discord loom threateningly, endangering the unity of the family. We cannot listen to this passively: being a family demands engagement.

¹³ *The Imitation of Christ*

Be prepared: when God speaks and acts in the world, as he did in Jesus, both the message and the messenger defy conventional human standards. God's ways will invariably challenge, disrupt, defy human expectations. To human common sense, God's methods are unconventional, even 'crazy'. If we, either individually or as church family, align ourselves with God's will, we may be perceived as 'crazy' by worldly standards. In one of his most popular sermons, Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, passionately exhorts to such necessary 'craziness', as he calls it: 'We need', he says, 'some Christians who are as crazy as the Lord. Crazy enough to love like Jesus, to give like Jesus, to forgive like Jesus, to do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God - like Jesus. Crazy enough to follow the radical way of the gospel. Crazy enough to believe that the love of God is greater than all the powers of evil and death. Crazy enough to dare to change the world from the nightmare it often is into something close to the dream that God dreams for it. And for those who would follow him, those who would be his disciples, [...] it might come as a shock, but they are called to craziness."¹⁴

Dare to be 'crazy'! Dare to do God's will!

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 3rd Sunday after Trinity

16th June 2024

All Saints' Marseille

Canon Alan Amos

For the first time in Mark's Gospel Jesus sits down! Deliberately, this provides quite a contrast with the breathless pace – with all those 'immediatlys' – of the first chapters of the Gospel. Jesus sitting down is a signal that a new stage in the Gospel, a new phase in Jesus' ministry, has now been reached. If you look at the

¹⁴ *Crazy Christians*

previous chapter you can see that Jesus' cure of the man with a withered hand on the sabbath (3.1-6) leads to a sort of climax. The religious and political leadership of the day are now determined to work together to get rid of Jesus by any means. At that point we could almost move 'fast forward' to the account of Jesus' passion. But we don't – because first of all Jesus has some important things he needs to teach his disciples, and Mark encourages us, his readers, to look over the disciples' shoulders and learn or re-learn these lessons for ourselves too. Of course, compared with the disciples we have the privilege of knowing how the story of Jesus and our salvation is to unfold. Yet there will be some surprises, and quite a lot of learning for us on the way, too.

And here in chapter 4 is where the serious learning begins. Parables, we know, are one of the main ways in which Jesus teaches people. In fact, Mark tells us that 'Jesus did not speak to the crowd except in parables'. And this chapter, itself sometimes called 'the parable chapter of Mark', begins with the parable of the sower - a parable which in a way provides the key to the parables – indeed to the ministry of Jesus as a whole. It tells us that parables are like seeds: they fall in many places, and many may hear them, but not all respond to the word and produce the necessary fruit.

But notice where Jesus is, when he tells these parables. If you translated the Greek of verse one absolutely literally, it says that Jesus 'got into a boat and sat on the sea'. Back in the Old Testament we can read in the Psalms how the Lord God sits enthroned on the sea, and his voice thunders over the mighty waters (Psalm 29.1-11). For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, a connection is being made here between Israel's God and this Galilean teacher, even though the throne from which he presides over the bringing about of God's reign is a small fishing boat. It is no accident that this chapter concludes by telling us how Jesus stills a storm out at sea, amazing the disciples and prompting their fearful question, 'Who is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?' (4.35-41)

As we stand on the seashore listening to Jesus – we find ourselves placed on an important threshold. One writer puts it: the seashore in Mark is 'the boundary between the human world of land, the ordered life of town and country, of business and religion, of seeds and lamps and vineyards, and the demonic world of sea, the lawless haunt of monsters, storms and destructive depth... And the point that Mark is making [in setting this key teaching chapter] "by the sea", is that if we want to receive the mystery of the Kingdom of God, we must go to that boundary, to that threshold. It is natural for us to want a way of salvation

that begins in our familiar city or village without disturbing our settled life. But that is not possible if we are to be true followers of Jesus. We may not be called ourselves to give up all security and to set sail on the fearsome and uncontrollable waters whipped up by the wind or the spirit (in Hebrew the word for wind and spirit is the same, *ruah*) – though through the ages that has been the calling of a number of the great saints of God – but at least we need to stand on the seashore and allow our faces to be caressed by the sea breeze, and splattered by the spray. It is only at this point, where God’s mysterious depths meet the domestic world of human beings, that the secret of the Kingdom can begin to be seen and shared.

The word ‘parable’ is an Anglicised version of a Greek word which means ‘thrown alongside’. We find a close neighbour to the word parable in the mathematical term ***parabola***. Visually we can think of the sea shore as the place where the sea is thrown alongside the land – so it is perhaps therefore the ideal place for parables, Jesus’ most characteristic teaching, where a vibrant image of the Kingdom is thrown alongside the everyday life of those who are listening to the words. Just as the ebb and flow of the waves repeatedly covers and uncovers the ground on which we are standing, so that gradually we are soaked, refreshed and revived, so also with parables, as we allow them to wash over us again and again we discover ourselves being changed and being given new eyes for seeing.

Our Gospel reading today brings us two parables, about the one who sows seed on the ground, and is amazed at how it grows. And the parable of the mustard seed and its mighty growth.

These two parables are often thought about as parables about the mission of the church, and the church is often identified as the kingdom about which Jesus is speaking. That identification has its problems, when we look at church history. More properly, the church is the herald of the kingdom, bringing into the present a foretaste of the kingdom which in its fullness is still to come. But in this world of today, I like to look at these two parables in a different way, and to see them as parables of hope. Hope is certainly in short supply, as we look around us, whether in Europe, or to the Middle East. There are two major death-dealing conflicts going on, neither of which can easily be resolved. Human beings are seen at their worst. Where then is hope? Let me suggest that hope is found in the seed. And that the message of Jesus for us is that despite everything which might well make us despair, the seed will prevail and bring

abundant life to be shared without discrimination. If we identify the seed with hope, hope which itself is a gift of the Holy Spirit, then it is something which can be hidden from us which only the future will fully reveal. We look around, and we see little of hope. But the future belongs to God and to the Kingdom of God. I think of the seeds of hope as those wonderful people who in their own lives turn away from the hatred of others, from the hatred of those that their political leaders urge them to hate and to destroy. I see the seeds of hope in those who still recognise the face of brother or sister in those who are supposed to be their enemy. These are the people who are in themselves the seed of hope, and to whom in God's providence the future belongs. Yes they seem to be insignificant and very small in number. But they are real, and they exist, and stand among us carrying their few loaves and fishes to provide for the needs of humanity. They are the true workers who work to bring in the Kingdom of God. Perhaps we need to recognise these bearers of the seed in every age, for they stand among us as people of resurrection hope. I picked up a small book in Geneva recently by Simone Weil, the woman who was in Auschwitz with her family and then became a leading French politician. In this book in which she is interviewed during the last years of her life, she recalls her mother in the prison camp, how she never ceased to care for others, but also never ceased to hope for a time when France and Germany might be reconciled. Her mother saw clearly that the future wellbeing of all depended on such a reconciliation and a healing of relationship.

Today, despite all the noise of hatred and destruction, there are those who stand against hatred and carry the torch for the future. They are like the seed of Abraham, that messenger of faith, from whom God raised up peoples of faith and peoples of hope. And we find hope today in Jesus the seed, who embraced suffering and death to give life to all. As we follow the stories in the gospels, the stories of good news in Christ, may the power of the Holy Spirit rekindle the spirit of hope within us. And may we have eyes to see the action of God among us, in those whom he continues to raise up. And so I conclude with a short poem.

I need the God of the here and now,
Not of the there and then,
The breaking open of the present moment
Into light

Into sight

Emmaus time again.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 4th Sunday after Trinity

23rd June 2024

Eglise Protestante Unie, Aix-en-Provence

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Today's Gospel reading is one of the best-known stories about Jesus. The scene touches something deep within us, as it's something we all experience at different times in our lives – the sense that we are about to be overwhelmed by something outside our control. The imagery in the story is powerful. In a maritime city like Marseille, both the opportunities and the dangers of the sea are part of the collective consciousness. All Saints owes its very existence to the city's maritime vocation, and our commitment today to the AMAM seafarers' club is but the latest manifestation of this church's concern for the welfare of 'those who go down to the sea in ships', in the words of today's Psalm.

The sea in the biblical imagination represents chaos, and a storm at sea the threat that chaos will overwhelm us. The image appears throughout our

readings and hymns today. The words which God speaks to Job in his suffering reveal to him how dependent he is on the God who is both powerful creator, unfathomable mystery and loving consoler. Yet Job has to learn it the hard way. In Mark's Gospel the disciples are discovering the same truth. In a severe storm the waters above and the waters below combine into a single mass – almost like an 'undoing' of the first act of creation, which began with God dividing the waters below from the waters above (Genesis 1.6-8). No wonder the disciples are terrified when a violent storm blows up on the Sea of Galilee, and they wake Jesus in fear: 'Do you not care that we are perishing?'

Mark's answer is clear. Yes, he does care, but there is more. Mark, who began his Gospel saying that it is about 'the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God', now shows Jesus's identity being revealed to his closest followers. They are, as ever, slow to take it in, taken aback when they see their teacher's impact on the elements ('Who then *is* this?'). But Mark's original hearers, and through them we, are being encouraged to understand that this is the Messiah, the anointed one. And not only that. He is one with the Creator, who can divide the waters. This is Paul's 'new creation' coming to birth, in a small boat on the Sea of Galilee.

There's another layer of meaning in the story, albeit referred to obliquely. The passage begins with Jesus saying to the disciples: 'Let us go across to the other side [of the lake]'. They are going from Jewish to Gentile territory, ending up in the land of the Gerasenes, where Jesus will heal the demoniac named Legion. This story, therefore, also points to the fact that the promised Messiah, revealed during the crossing of the lake, is not just for the Jewish nation but also for the Gentiles. This good news is for the whole world.

What does this story tell us about our own faith journeys? When we wake in the small hours, sometimes we are able to admit to ourselves that we are travelling on a sea of chaos. At present, across the democratic world the political landscape is in flux, and there is a sense of deep uncertainty around. For much of our lives we are able to reassure ourselves that we are in control of events, but ultimately we have to face the reality that we are not. What then? Do we find ourselves able to trust in God in the storms of our lives? That's a lot easier to preach than to do.

But there is wisdom in this story. When we are tempted to cry out; 'Do you not care?', Jesus responds by asking us to choose faith over fear. He himself had complete trust in the Father, even when the world was caving in on him – the final word from the cross, in Luke's account, is 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit'. The question for us which this passage raises is: 'What would our life be like if our fear about life without God was dwarfed by our wonder about life with God?'

Paul gives us a glimpse of the answer. Ever a believer in the rhetorical power of lists, he notes that people of faith are, like everyone else, prey to 'afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger'. But they can, in time, confront a list like that with 'purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God', in good times and in bad. For the Christian message is not, and never has been, 'believe in Jesus and everything will be fine'. There is challenge, adversity and often sacrifice. But the mystery is that it is in those times that Christ is revealed most intimately to us. And it is then that we discover, like the disciples in the boat, that no storm can ultimately overwhelm us. We may be 'dying, [but] see – we are alive', 'having nothing, and yet possessing everything'.

If we can allow faith to conquer fear – even blind faith, the kind that hangs on when all familiar points of reference have become lost in turmoil and darkness ('My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?') - then we shall be like those who have nothing yet possess everything. Jesus invites us by his example to have faith that whatever threatens us cannot overcome the power of God to bring peace and strength. ('Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.') The God who upends all that we expect is able to transform our fear into courage. Even when we feel completely lost.

Finding faith in fear is not easy, but it's what we are called to do. Resting in the knowledge that God is stronger than the storm, as the words of our hymns today attest. It's also the message of our Communion anthem today: 'Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee'. Jesus had an absolute trust in the power and love of God. It was this profound experience that he made present to his disciples, and still does.

For we are all travelling across the water, on a sea of chaos. But our prayer, and our trust, are that we will ultimately find our way home.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 4th Sunday after Trinity – Olympic Day

23rd June 2024

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Assistant Chaplain

‘Citius! Altius! Fortius!’ – Faster! Higher! Stronger! In just over a month, we will hear again these inspiring exhortations, as we immerse ourselves in the glory and excitement of the Olympics - a celebration of human potential, perseverance and fair play.

More than 10,000 athletes from around the world and all walks of life will compete in the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. They will give their all to represent their countries with dignity, hoping to win medals and become champions. Those who journey alongside the athletes - coaches, staff, families, friends, and supporters - will share in their joys and in their disappointments, the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. For a few moments, we will all become part of something much larger than our individual lives and concerns.

However, in the athletes’ quest for excellence, true victory is not defined by physical prowess or medals. As we witness their exploits, we will also see their commitment to embodying integrity, courage, respect, and friendship – the values upon which the modern Olympic movement was founded, with its aspiration to bring greater peace among peoples and to build a better world.

In 1992, the ancient tradition of the Olympic truce was revived - a period when the host state is not attacked, allowing athletes and spectators to travel safely and peacefully. I hope and pray that this year the solemn appeal for truce will be observed both individually and collectively across the world, that we will have a time when ‘nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more’ (Isaiah 2.4). We all know that, in these difficult times, the Olympic Truce is more relevant than ever. It can send an unequivocal signal to the whole world: yes, we can be united, even in times of war and crisis. Yes, we can work together for a better future.

‘There is more that unites us than divides us’; ‘develop harmony’; ‘demonstrate respect’; ‘practise a spirit of friendship and solidarity’ – there is so much in the Olympic Charter that resonates deeply with the Gospel. It is not surprising, then, to hear Paul use the imagery of an athlete as a prototype or our own Christian journey: ‘Do you not know,’ he wrote to the community in Corinth, ‘that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it.’ Paul was very likely familiar with the Isthmian Games, held every other year just outside the city of Corinth. These games attracted athletes from distant parts, and the victor’s prize was ‘a perishable garland’, a pine wreath in Paul’s time.

Paul saw in the discipline and competition of these games a fitting model for Christian discipleship, which he likened to a race to be run, a fight to be fought, with the goal of receiving the imperishable crown of everlasting life. He encouraged the Corinthians to live a voluntary and determined life of discipleship.

Paul was right: who could fail to be inspired by the athletes? Their dedication, hard work, enthusiasm are always palpable. They know the cost of reaching their goals, take nothing for granted and are prepared to work hard to achieve them. Similarly, the journey of faith, like the road to the Olympic Games or any athletic achievement, requires determination, high standards for oneself, endurance in the face of challenges, perseverance in practising love for one's neighbour, and rigorous training on the path of justice and peace. We can't live our Christian faith vicariously, Paul says. We aren't spectators here; we are participants who should strive to do our best.

The desire to be the greatest, and to compete against the greatest, surely motivates many athletes. Some champions will be asked by interviewers: 'How does it feel to be the greatest in the world? What does it take to be the greatest in your discipline?' In today's Gospel reading, we find the disciples arguing about who among them is the greatest. This is a familiar scene to many of us, isn't it? Whether in sports, academics, or our careers, the desire to be recognized as the best often drives our actions. Despite walking closely with Jesus, the disciples, were not immune to this human tendency. Yet Jesus has a different take on greatness. The advice he gave his disciples turned - as ever - the world's thinking upside down: 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' In the kingdom of God, greatness is not measured by our achievements, titles, or recognition. True greatness is measured by our willingness to serve and our humility in doing so.

If you ask me what my favourite virtue to witness in sports is, I will say without any hesitation that it is humility. We live in a look-at-me culture, where many, whether in the sports arena or everyday life, crave attention and fame and have a real drive to be in the spotlight. That is what makes the most humble sports heroes unique - people whose best work is done in silence, whose relentless pursuit of excellence is a quiet one, for whom teamwork is of paramount importance, and whom the accolades of success do not change.

A few weeks ago, I mentioned Eric Lidell, the Scottish Christian athlete described as someone entirely without vanity. His short life is remembered for his

accomplishments in many different ways. There is, of course, the gold medal he won in the 400 metres at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris. At the Games, he was held in respect because “what he has thought it right to do, that he has done, looking neither to the left nor the right, and yielding not one jot or tittle of principle either to court applause or to placate criticism.” But there is much more to his story than his sports achievements. Some of you may already know about his missionary service in China, his work as a teacher and sports trainer, and his death while imprisoned during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Even in this difficult situation, it is said that he remained hopeful and continued to communicate his optimism to the campmates. An Olympic champion who chose to live a life of compassionate and generous service, Liddell embodied humility, aware that God is the author of all good – a belief that surely guided his actions.

One of my hopes for this year’s Games is that they will surprise us not only with the quality of the spectacle and the number of records set, but also with the message that it is possible to compete fiercely, while embodying respect and friendship, and that true greatness lies in being humble and generous in service.

Last autumn, during the Rugby World Cup, my highlight was a very special moment when, after a bruising match, the teams of South Africa and Tonga gathered together in a circle on the field, held on to each other, knelt down, and prayed together. That’s the beauty of sports and the importance of the Olympics: they can bring people together, always building bridges and never erecting walls.

As we prepare to welcome the Olympic events here in France, and in our city of Marseille, may they rekindle in each of us a passion for goodness and righteousness, renewing our commitment to spread the light of hope and peace to those around us. May the God of peace guide us on this path.

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS’ MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 5th Sunday after Trinity

30th June 2024

All Saints’ Marseille (via Zoom)

Jane Quarmby, Licensed Lay Minister

Have you ever felt bombarded by pleas from charities for giving? They seem to be everywhere – on TV, radio, magazines, e mails, for everything from homeless people to children needing surgery or clean water to neglected animals. It can seem overwhelming at times and difficult to see how my £2 a month can make any difference. Which ones to support? Oh to win the Lotto and give millions to make a real difference. But then I remember that I'm not on my own in this – there are indeed millions of people relatively well off and if everyone gave £2 a month to their selected charities, together we really could make a difference, we could even out the gap between those who have and those who have not. It's a travesty that we complain about the healthcare in our countries when there is none at all in other areas of the world, it's a disgrace that in the West tons of edible food is thrown away whilst people starve. We run clean water in our sinks waiting for the hot water to arrive, whilst others walk miles for dirty water. It's an enormous problem, this divide between the haves and the have nots.

Our Bible readings today might seem disconnected from that, but there's a theme of giving and giving generously in Mark and Paul.

In our Gospel reading, we have two examples of the generosity and self-giving of Jesus, in healing people. Reading about all the times that he healed people from all walks of life, it's easy to assume that it was some kind of magic, that it cost him nothing to do – he only had to look at someone it seems and they would be healed. But I don't think that's so – he felt a drain on his energy when the woman touched his cloak. His healing came with intense prayer from him, from intense effort and concentration. There are it is said, two types of people, those who give out energy to others, and those who drain energy from others. Supporting, counselling, nursing, just listening and empathising all takes energy – after a day of listening to other people's problems and hardships, it can seem as though every last ounce of energy has been leached away. The giver has to recharge their batteries and Jesus did that through time alone in prayer – but not strictly speaking alone. His prayers and time without others around him was spent in communion with God, the source of his energy and power.

Having just invested in an electric car and come up against all sorts of problems with our eccentric Provençal electric wiring system, I now have an even greater appreciation of how important it is for us, like Jesus, to have a direct cable plugged in to God, to recharge our batteries. Thankfully that isn't as complicated

as rewiring your house, but it does take discipline and time to go away on our own and plug into that bottomless well of energy and power. If not, like my lovely shiny car, we'll come to an abrupt halt somewhere highly inconvenient.

Jesus gave extravagantly and willingly to all who needed him, whether by healing anyone and everyone who asked or even those who were too shy or embarrassed to ask, by teaching, by leading by example, by feeding vast crowds of people, and ultimately giving his life for us to rescue us from death. True self sacrifice, the ultimate generosity. And all done on his part without self advertisement, quietly without any conceit or need for praise.

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, also talks about giving and gives us an object lesson. He's writing to a church which is in really good shape, blessed with all sorts of gifts, working well on the surface, one that has made great strides in his absence. But it appears to be functioning on its own, happy in its own busy workings and looking after itself. It seems to have forgotten that it is part of a greater church, and Paul is reminding the people there that they began with great enthusiasm, and have an abundance of skills, knowledge and faith, but they need to look outside their own cosy environment to other groups within the overall Christian community who aren't doing as well. Specifically he is referring to the community in Jerusalem which is poor and in need of financial support. Was there some kind of discrimination I wonder – the Corinthians were a mostly Gentile group, whereas that in Jerusalem was made up of Jews who had decided to follow Christ. Or were they just wrapped up in their own world? Whatever the reason, Paul wasn't afraid to ask them to make good on their early enthusiasm and help out their fellow less fortunate Christians, to have greater awareness that they weren't the only Christian group and their responsibilities included supporting other communities. Regardless of ethnicity, they were all Christians. He urges them to give generously and cheerfully, not to the point of impoverishing themselves, but to share their wealth. He assures them that his envoys who are coming to collect their donations are upright, honest and trustworthy, so they could be confident their money would be going to where it should.

That letter was written nearly 2000 years ago but the sentiments are so of today – so many churches are focused on their own communities, on keeping afloat, of keeping the roof on, that they fail to look outside and recognise those in even greater need. People, often with good cause, are suspicious of charities – they want their money to go where it should, not be siphoned off into employees'

pockets or corrupt governments. We perhaps, as I mentioned, are suffering from too many requests for financial help and in the clamour of cries for help get so bewildered that we end up not giving at all to anyone. Others dedicate their lives and all that they have to helping others and they are truly a blessing wherever they are. You may have heard of Marlene Engelhorn, a young Austrian who has inherited 25 million euros from her grandmother and is busy giving it away to good causes via a panel of strangers.

Paul's message is realistic – he isn't asking for the world, he knows people still need to live. But he does ask for cheerful givers – people who realise how well off they are and willingly share what they have with others less fortunate. His message is timeless and applies just as much to us as it did to the Corinthians.

God loves a cheerful giver – and we all need as much of God's love as we can get.

Amen.