

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 6th Sunday after Trinity

7th July 2024

All Saints' Marseile

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

The late Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, who campaigned against racism during the apartheid era in South Africa, once commented that whenever people said to him that religion should stay out of politics 'because they don't mix', it made him wonder which Bible they were reading. We are in a season of parliamentary elections in France and the UK, in both cases heralding significant change, while the forthcoming presidential election in the US is never far from the news. What do our Bible readings today have to say to us at this time of political upheaval?

Our Lectionary (the programme of scriptural readings shared by Roman Catholic, Protestant and Anglican churches) sets two possible Old Testament readings each Sunday. We tend to use the one known as the 'related' reading, chosen by the Lectionary compilers because it bears some relation to the Gospel of the day. Today's reading from Ezekiel is the 'related' reading, but if we had taken the other one from the Second Book of Samuel, we would have heard of David becoming king of all Israel and making a covenant with his people. It's a text that raises questions of what it means to be the new leader of a nation, how they might unite a people who have been divided for a generation, what it means to have a vocation to a role that carries heavy responsibility. These are

good questions to reflect on as a new leader takes office in the countries we call home.

But today we have stayed with Ezekiel, for it too offers scope for reflection on the world of politics. On Friday morning, a significant group in the United Kingdom were left asking the question: what went wrong? And tomorrow morning in France a significant group (albeit a different one) will be asking the same question. Whenever an election results in a shift in the political landscape, people find themselves the next day out of a job, carrying a vision for society that has been rejected by those they sought to persuade.

‘What went wrong?’ is also the basic question behind the Old Testament. It was written in the years after 600 BC when the people of ancient Israel were in exile from the promised land following the destruction of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon. From their exile in Babylon, as they collected together the stories and traditions that made up their history, they reflected both on the disaster and on the ways God was still with them. They found, paradoxically, that they felt closer to God in exile than they had in prosperity.

In the Book of Ezekiel, the answer given to the question ‘what went wrong?’ is that it was because the people were ‘a rebellious house’: they had not kept the covenant with God. Yet Ezekiel is aware that his message will fall largely on deaf ears. All he can hope for is that at least ‘they shall know there has been a prophet among them’. For a politician facing electoral wilderness this week, those words might offer some consolation.

A consoling message is also to be found in our Epistle this morning. 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' It's a reading for those who have suffered disappointment. People who thought they were going to be elected but who found that more people had voted for someone else. People having to adjust to a new reality. That applies not just to politicians but to anyone who has suffered a setback – through illness, loss of employment, loss of purpose. It's a reminder that Christianity isn't about the strong, the powerful, the successful or the sorted. It's about the reality of weakness, oppression, failure and mess. The way we respond to failure and disappointment can let the light of Christ shine through us just as much as if we are one of the outwardly powerful or successful.

If you ask people why they are Christian, you might be surprised how often they talk about times of challenge and tragedy rather than success or celebration. We still find ourselves closer to God in exile than while we are in the promised land. Closer to the cross, which turns out not to be the end of the story. For the New Testament, like the Old, was written by a people coming to terms with catastrophe – that of the crucifixion – yet who were finding that in Jesus's resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit they were in a different story from the one they had supposed.

Our Gospel reading from Mark begins when Jesus returns home to Nazareth after the success of the beginning of his ministry around the shores of Lake Galilee. There he comes up against the narrow expectations of village and family, a resistance that has both an individual and a social dimension: 'Is not this the carpenter?' But it's not just the 'offence of the familiar' that he encounters. People are also unhappy about his prophetic message. In Luke's

account, the local mood turns sour when Jesus suggests how God's love extends to ethnicities and social classes many thought were displeasing to God. It is Jesus's determination to act as a prophet - challenging the status quo, calling out the narrow-minded religiosity of the authorities – that gets him into trouble, and not just in Nazareth. This scene is a precursor of the final act in Jerusalem.

But Jesus is not discouraged by his rejection. He continues his ministry of teaching and healing. His rejection is an important lesson for the disciples in preparation for their own mission. And it is at this point that he sends them out in pairs to proclaim the coming kingdom of God, to encourage those they meet to have a change of heart (which is what repentance means). If their hearers don't want to listen, the disciples are to shake the dust from their feet and move on.

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What will become of them, I wonder? Those who weren't elected on Thursday in the UK or today in France. The answer is that it's not the end of their story. 'Shake the dust from your feet' can sometimes be good advice to someone who has done all they can in a situation – a political role, a job or a relationship - but has ultimately been rejected. It is often our failures that teach us more than our successes. Being given a second chance is what the Christian faith is profoundly about. As one commentator has put it:

'The consistent theme [of the Bible] is that God takes the person who has been overlooked, the one who has been beleaguered, the figure who is an outsider or a failure; finds in that person a quality neither they nor the

world recognised, and in the power of the Spirit, transforms that person into something no one dreamed or imagined.’¹

Like the disciples, all of us go into God’s future with open hands, trusting in him, taking very little with us. But we do so in the knowledge that Christ secured our salvation by opening his hands wide on the cross, and that the story didn’t end there. If we can bring ourselves to imitate that surrender to God’s unknown but extraordinary future, we will find ourselves upheld by those arms, throughout our lives and beyond.

That’s a message of hope for anyone who may be feeling disappointment today. Who says religion and politics don’t mix?

Amen.

¹ The Revd Dr Sam Wells, Sermon given at St Martin-in-the Fields, London, 16th June 2024.