

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Sermon – 7th Sunday after Trinity – Sea Sunday

14th July 2024

Eglise du Sacré-Coeur, Oppède

Christine Portman, Reader

A common thread runs through this morning's readings. One theme is the sea: of course, because today is Sea Sunday. But these texts also reflect fear and hope, certainty and uncertainty, and they're issues we'll come back to as we look more closely at them. But on this special day we're remembering seafarers and their families, and all those in peril on the sea, particularly because our chaplaincy is so generously supported by the Mission to Seafarers. Members of our Marseille congregation work alongside the team from the Association Marseillaise d'Accueil des Marins - the Seamen's club on the impressive port. The services they offer are a lifeline to seafarers - men and women who are often very poorly paid and find themselves at sea for months, unable to step down or contact family or friends.

But the seafarers we heard about this morning hardly grab our sympathy. *In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved." So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away.*

Can you imagine the scene? A stormy night, the boat *being driven across the Adriatic Sea*; the terror of those on board, sensing the rocks all around them and hearing the pounding waves on an unseen shore. Fearing for their lives. When the boat finally founders and the stern breaks up, only the centurion, *who wanted to spare Paul's life*, comes out of the story with any kind of honour, but maybe he was afraid of punishment if he allowed his chief prisoner to escape? After all, we believe Paul was a Roman citizen and we know he was on his way to Rome to face charges.

And again, in today's psalm we read of *those who go down to the sea in ships*, their utter panic in the face of a storm, and of God's calming the waters as he brings them

in safety to the haven. Then in the gospel reading there's the account of the stilling of the storm. We see more fear and dread, as the disciples' boat is caught up in one of the famously *furious squalls* on the Sea of Galilee. In the reading from the Book of Job, the Lord speaks to him out of the storm, mocking him for his pride:

*'Who is this that obscures my plans
with words without knowledge?
Brace yourself like a man;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.
'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?
Tell me, if you understand.
Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!'*

This passage reminds us of how often we humans are guilty of thinking we have the answers to difficult questions. It's a good reminder of the need for humility. All our knowledge is as nothing in the light of God's unknowable immensity.

As I prepared to speak to you today and read all the accounts of fearful people in foundering boats, I couldn't help but think of the fear and panic driving our increasingly polarized politics, not only in France, but across Europe and indeed, the wider world. There are many who seek simple answers to extremely complex questions, who sadly fail to look deeply into the malaises affecting their own societies, instead pointing accusing fingers elsewhere. Their targets are so often the millions worldwide, fleeing dictatorships, torture, war and grinding poverty, women and men seeking nothing more than a decent life for themselves and their families. Last year more than 3,000 men women and children drowned in the Mediterranean alone, often on dark and stormy nights, sometimes left to die by the unscrupulous gangs who exploit their misery, or even worse, driven to their deaths by the boats of those legally obliged to protect them.

And I also wonder would we be sitting here in church today had people not been free to cross borders in Paul's time. He was on his way to Rome to face trial, but he was born in Tarsus – modern day Turkey. His vision of Christ took place on the road to Damascus in what's now Syria. Three years after his conversion, he travelled down to Jerusalem to meet with Peter and the other apostles. He preached tirelessly throughout his own country, founding communities in Ephesus and

Colosse and Galatia, but also much further afield to Philippi and Thessalonika, now part of Greece, to Malta and Cyprus and ultimately to his martyrdom at Rome. Where would we be without his marvellous epistles and without the missionary work of all the apostles and saints? Indeed, where would many of our great countries be and what would our own families look like without the constant to and fro of people over hundreds of thousands of years?

On Thursday night, four people drowned in the English Channel, just more figures to add to the 19 who've died in similar circumstances this year – a flimsy inflatable losing air, people without life jackets, men and women who would have parted with enormous sums in order to escape from life on the edge. And these figures pale – but never into insignificance – at the side of the 3015 migrants dead or missing at sea last year.

God's words to Job remind him of his smallness in this great universe, of the power of God who says to the sea: *"This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt"*. And in the gospel reading, in a boat tossed about on the Sea of Galilee, we see God's power at work: the waves are stilled and the storm is calmed. Whilst the disciples panic, Jesus sleeps calmly on a cushion in the stern. He is not steering the boat. He's trusting that they will arrive safely on the other shore. There's a good deal of symbolism here. Yet the heart of the story lies in his rebuke to the disciples: *'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?'*

In his life on earth, our Saviour unceasingly preached of the need to love one another. His parables so often carry the message of caring for the stranger, having respect for the other. In the Sermon on the Mount, a clear message from the Beatitudes is this: *'If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'* (Matthew 5.46-48)

Jesus calls us to step away from our fears, and instead follow his Great Commandment to love one another. We humans want knowledge, we hanker after certainty and security, we want our opinions to be right - but our understanding is imperfect: we can never capture the whole picture. Jesus acknowledges human weakness and offers a more perfect way. He asks us to walk in his footsteps, putting our complete trust and faith in God's goodness as we accept his Way of love. Amen