

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 7th Sunday after Trinity – Sea Sunday

14th July 2024

All Saints' Marseile

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Today, being the second Sunday in July, many churches around the world mark Sea Sunday. This is, of course, an occasion to celebrate the bounty of God's creation, marvel at the natural beauty of the sea, and give thanks for its gifts. However, Sea Sunday goes beyond this picturesque view. It focuses on the often-overlooked lives of seafarers, those called to 'go across to the other side', who navigate the vastness of the seas and might face isolation, danger, and arduous conditions.

Today, we heard readings that exemplify how the Scriptures talk about the sea and seafarers. God addresses Job from a whirlwind, recapitulating the story of the Creation and highlighting the mastery of the waters of chaos. In the Psalm, sailors, for whom God calms a tempest, respond with gladness for their deliverance. We also heard a vivid account from the Acts of the Apostles, where Paul is caught in a winter storm off the coast of Crete, and ultimately shipwrecked and cast ashore on the island of Malta. And, of course, we heard one of the most dramatic and beloved stories in the New Testament: Jesus stilling the storm.

Our chaplaincy in Marseille has long served the seafarers who came ashore in our city, gaining insight into their difficult, dangerous and lonely lives. Today, ships are vastly different from those of St Paul's day. Cargo ships, super tankers, roll-on/roll-off car carriers, luxury cruise liners criss-cross the oceans equipped with sophisticated navigation instruments. Yet life on board remains tough and often dangerous. Seafarers often endure extreme weather conditions, and their occupation is one of the world's most perilous, with piracy, shipwreck and abandonment among the threats they face. And what about the months-long voyages so many international seafarers undertake, leaving them isolated from loved ones?

Very few people realise how much we rely on seafarers: 90% of the world's trade is carried by sea, involving nearly 2 million seafarers, who operate on 74,000 ships. Yet we hear very little about these people. Does anyone know that they are out at sea, other than their families and friends? When a ship comes into the port, the seafarers might get time ashore, but they are strangers in a strange land. How important, then, is the work of the Mission to Seafarers worldwide? Similarly, here in Marseille, we have the AMAM, *L'Association Marseillaise d'Accueil des Marins*, offering a home from home, a friendly face to talk to, the opportunity to spend quiet time with friends, to get in touch with family.

I have immense respect for all those who, across time, have responded to the call to 'go across to the other side': navigators, seafarers and even migrants who, out of despair, embark on frail boats. Many of them experience the sea, or even a small body of water like the Sea of Galilee, as a challenging place, where life hangs in the balance. They find themselves on a tossed and imperilled ship, sailing on the fearsome and uncontrollable waters whipped up by the wind. Those among them who profess faith may cry out in fear, doubt and abandonment, echoing the cry often repeated in the stories of God's people: 'Do you not care that we are perishing?'

Yet the Gospel story of the stilling of the storm has always been understood to hold a meaning deeper than its literal one. In an age marked by external persecutions and internal controversy and conflict, the early church must have appeared like a boat navigating a stormy sea. The first Christians likely echoed the desperate plea of Christ's disciples in the boat, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'

The winds of change and the waters of chaos continue to batter the worldwide church and people of faith. In our personal lives, we too face stress and storms, as our individual boats are tossed about by waves of economic uncertainty and change, war, illness, grief, racial and political unrest. As Augustine of Hippo described in one of his sermons, we are 'souls sailing across the sea of this world in a wooden vessel.'¹ Life can feel overwhelming and out of control. Waves crash, the boat fills up, and we struggle to stay afloat. 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'

'Let us go across to the other side,' Jesus says. Here lies a parable of discipleship: Christians are called to journey with Christ 'to the other side', to cross

¹ Augustine, *Sermon 63*

boundaries. This is never going to be easy. On the other side, uncharted territories await. But what does Christ do after crossing 'to the other side', after crossing many new boundaries - social, cultural and religious? He eats with those deemed unsuitable, challenges Sabbath laws, associates with the 'unclean' and heals them at unconventional times. He opens minds to new possibilities, liberating people to embrace a future of freedom and wholeness. For him, no place is forsaken, and no one is abandoned. Christ reveals that God's kingdom extends to places we might have considered beyond its reach.

The boundaries we are called to cross are as diverse as they are numerous: boundaries of ethnicity, class, status, culture and education. Attempting to navigate these boundaries can be a tempestuous experience. Following Jesus across to the other side does not promise us, whether as individuals or as a church, a life free from storms. Even after weathering these storms, following Jesus may well lead us directly into encounters with the deepest pain and suffering in the world - places where Jesus' word and healing touch are most needed.

In Mark's story, the clear truth is that Jesus is just as present in the raging storm as he was in the soothing calm that followed. At no moment that night was God absent or distant. In that vulnerable boat, amidst the swelling and terrifying waters, the disciples were in Christ's company. He rested in their midst, tossed and soaked as they were tossed and soaked. He journeyed with his disciples through the turmoil.

I hope we will seek the grace to experience God's presence in the storm; the grace to know that he accompanies us in tempestuous situations; the grace to trust that Christ cares, even when we seem to be drowning; the grace to believe in the power of God's love even when he seems to be asleep.

May we respond to this grace with the courage to 'go across to the other side', and always to ask the question grounded in wonder, in life-giving curiosity: 'Who is this man?' In doing so, let us allow Christ to reveal himself to us, ever challenging, ever mysterious, ever new.

Amen.