

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

Sermon – St Peter and St Paul - Baptism

29th June 2025

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

It is a great pleasure and a privilege to be here today, as we gather here for Tabitha's Baptism. We will be doing something which from earliest times the church has done: welcoming a new member of the family by the use of ritual and symbol, using a liturgy that is both ancient and ever new. In this service we are celebrating the two sacraments which Jesus instructed his followers to celebrate. Matthew's Gospel ends with Jesus's words: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' This is what we do in Baptism. And on the night before he died, while sharing the Passover meal with his friends, Jesus asked them to continue breaking bread and sharing wine, actions which formed part of that meal, but thinking of them in a new way as his own body and blood: 'Do this in remembrance of me.' This is what we do in the Eucharist.

Sacraments are physical, tangible things – they have been called 'the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace'. The purpose of sacraments is both to symbolise and to confer that grace, that gift of God's presence and the assurance of God's love for us. Today we are doing both – baptising and breaking bread.

Tabitha is joining a long line of witnesses, here at All Saints' and beyond. The Letter to the Hebrews says: 'since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us' (Heb. 12.1). The first of the symbols we use in baptism is oil. Olive oil, which was always a precious commodity, has a richly symbolic value in the Scriptures. Kings were anointed with it to show that they were chosen by God. It was also used to sanctify priests in the temple. In the ancient world it was used to anoint athletes before they began a race, to make them more supple. As in a relay race, the Christian faith is handed on. Today Tabitha's parents and godparents will promise to introduce her to its riches, and we pray that in time she will discover the beauty of it for herself. It will be her response to God's love, for God will be with her as she grows up.

God will be with her. It has been said that the word 'with' is the most significant word in the whole of the Scriptures. At Christmas we celebrate the coming of Christ as Emmanuel, God with us. We believe in a God who is not remote from us, but our faith is incarnational, authentic to human experience. Christ knew our human experience and there is nothing of what we feel that he has not felt.

This takes us to the second of the symbols we use in baptism: water. The symbolic immersion in water used by the early church in baptism was not only a symbolic purifying, a cleansing from sin, but also a symbolic partaking in Jesus's death and resurrection – the new member of the church was being born into a new life with God. Nowadays we just use a sprinkling of water – if all goes well I will not be dunking Tabitha in the font.

At the end of the service, we will give Tabitha the final symbol of her baptism - a lighted candle, to take with her so that she may shine as a light in the world. Showing the world what love means.

When Bishoy and Louise asked if we could hold the service today, I hadn't realised the significance of the date. For it's a very appropriate day on which to be baptised – the day the worldwide church celebrates the Feast of St Peter and St Paul. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles tells of how Peter and Paul spread the Gospel message across the known world, Peter based in Jerusalem and Paul travelling throughout the Gentile lands. The Church celebrates them both on this Sunday, a time at which ordinations traditionally take place. So it is appropriate that Tabitha should be joining the church formally today, the day of her baptism.

Our Gospel reading today describes the moment at which Simon Peter realises the full significance of the man he and his friends have been following through Galilee as he preached and taught, healed and fed the crowds. Jesus asks: 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' The disciples begin by reciting the different things people have been saying about him, but he insists: 'But who do you say that I am?' It is Peter who voices the truth that has gradually dawned on them: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' It's a moment of profound recognition, to which Jesus responds with a naming: 'Simon son of Jonah, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church'. In baptism the candidate is also named - in a few minutes I will say 'Tabitha, I baptise you...'

In our Epistle this morning, we heard how Peter, imprisoned for his preaching of the Gospel, escapes from his chains with the help of an angel. It's a story we can hear on different levels, including the symbolic. The loosing of chains is a powerful symbol of what the Christian faith does for us. Freeing us from our sins, from all that drags us down. So often we feel imprisoned by things that

prevent us from living life to the full, things that keep us from God. In baptism we are released from them – washed symbolically, once and for all.

Today Tabitha begins a journey of faith. Jesus said: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' The Bench of Bishops of the Church in Wales recently put it like this: 'We each have an innermost identity known only to God, which it is our purpose to discover in its deepest reality.' That's a beautiful vision for Tabitha as she sets out on her journey. In it, she will be nurtured and sustained by her parents and godparents. May God bless them all, and may we each reaffirm in our hearts our own baptismal promises, as we commit to supporting Tabitha in our life as a community of followers of Christ.

Amen.