

Sunday 12 February 2023

Holy Trinity (08.00) & (09.30) – Holy Communion

2 before Lent

Genesis 1:1 - 2:3

Romans 8:18-25

Matthew 6:25-end

Our reading from Matthew's Gospel reminds us how important it is not to take all passages of Scripture and apply them directly to ourselves as if they had no original context and no history between then and now.

Here, we find Jesus telling his hearers that God will give them everything they need, if only they set their hearts on the kingdom of God. That's all very well but we do, of course, know that throughout the ages and still today, many, many people have perished for lack of food, clothing and basic necessities.

So, that being so, are we to assume that they somehow failed to concentrate sufficiently on the Kingdom? Whereas we, who have the good fortune to live comparatively sheltered, well provisioned lives, are also much better at keeping our hearts fixed on God.

Of course not, absolutely not.

So, what has struck me is just how hard it is to hear Jesus say, "Do not worry about your life."

Do not worry?? You've got to be kidding. Most days, life feels like one worry strung after another like lights on a Christmas tree.

Worries at work (an impossible deadline or an angry boss).

Worries at home (maybe a child struggling at school). Worries about...well, you name it (the economy, war in Europe, the threat of terrorism, the friend whose child was just diagnosed with cancer...).

Do you see what I mean?

Worries surround us like bees round a honey pot.

And I don't think it's just me. I think that generally we live in an incredibly anxious culture. The daily news bulletins certainly depend on worries at home and abroad to attract viewers. Advertisements are constantly inviting us to worry about one more thing -- usually about ourselves! And whenever I go to a train station I'm greeted by an announcer telling me what to do if I spot an unattended package. I've even been to a conference centre not too long ago only to be greeted by a sign that tells me that today's threat level is yellow or orange, whatever that means. I guess that orange is worse than yellow but not as bad as red. Who knows? Either way, it doesn't sound good.

And there it is: everywhere you turn, everywhere you look, there are visible reminders of just how much there is to worry about. So how in the world, then, can Jesus possibly ask us -- really, command us! -- not to worry?

How then do we approach this passage from our Gospel reading?

I think the first thing to bear in mind then is that we need some discipline in approaching a passage like this in order to understand what is going on. In other words, we need to be able to put this into some kind of context. Context is everything.

How can we do this?

Well, firstly, try to imagine the people Jesus was speaking to. This passage is part of the Sermon on the Mount and, if you read the whole of this sermon, that's chapters 5, 6 and 7, you will begin to build up a picture of a fairly settled, law abiding crowd. They're not so well off that they're cushioned from day to day worry entirely, but, for the most part, they are probably reasonably satisfied with their lives. Everything Jesus says to them is utterly provocative and challenging to that settled way of life and I imagine that there is something in his listeners that wants to be provoked. Otherwise, what are they doing, following Jesus all the way up this mountain and listening to his teaching? Surely, if they didn't want the message they would've voted with their feet.

So, what about us?

Instead of concentrating on the reassurances offered here, we need to listen for the challenges. Not what God promises, which this crowd probably already have, but more what God asks. The radical picture of discipleship that Jesus sets out in the Sermon on the Mount is meant to shake us loose from all the petty things and instead get us excited by the possibility of a new and adventurous attitude to life.

It is, perhaps, the kind of adventurousness that is found in God himself. The adventurousness we see set out in the first chapter of Genesis that we also heard this morning. This description of God at work positively fizzles with excitement.

I read this and I have a picture in my mind. In this picture, I imagine God creating everything - everything out of nothing, and I see the three persons of the Trinity shouting out at each other... "Come, come and look at this!", "Let's have another few hundred types of trees - let's have another thousand different animals! This is working so well".

Think about it yourselves - there's God roaming around in what he's already made, all the colour, all the scent and the noise all spread out where once there was nothing. And God just loves it. On any one of the days of creation, God could have stopped, satisfied with what he had made, but instead, he goes on and on, until finally he makes something that is as like himself as possible.

And then, what does he do? He shares that glorious creation. In fact, he gives it away. He shares it with us, his final creation. Why? Because that's the whole point of it. That's why he set out on this project in the first place.

The pleasure isn't just for himself. A pleasure shared is a pleasure tripled - it looks like God the Trinity knew that long before he set out on this creation project.

Indulge me a bit further. Think about this image we've just painted of God the creator. In this image we can see a joy in everything. A joy that resists the cares and worries of tomorrow.

In all this, God knew the risks he was taking and yet he still delighted in what he had made. We hear that God saw what he had made and pronounced it to be "good". In fact, there were times when he said it was "very good".

I can't help wondering if that's what Jesus was thinking when he was up on that mountain, looking down on the puzzled and hopeful crowd giving his now famous sermon. Was he trying to get across to them some sense of that kind of delight in life and creation?

Living totally without worry, sounds, to many people, as impossible as living totally without breathing. Some people are so hooked on worry that, if they haven't got anything to worry about, they worry that they've forgotten something.

So, when Jesus tells us not to worry about what to eat, or drink, or wear, he doesn't mean that those things don't matter. Far from it. It's about priorities - put the world first, and you'll find it gets moth-eaten in your hands. Put God first, and you'll get the world thrown in. Of course, because we live in a world filled with anxiety, it's easy to let it all rub off on us.

To counter all that, here, at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, is an invitation that surprisingly few people even try to take up. Jesus clearly thought it was important that we do. And, for our part, we should at least give it a go. You never know, we might just end up with a glimpse of the glory of God's creation and a taste of that same exhilaration God felt when he first created it.

Amen.