

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon**

**Second Sunday before Lent - 12<sup>th</sup> February 2023**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate*

“Can any of us, by worrying, add a single hour to our span of life? I tell you, do not worry.”

This is a good point, Jesus, but is your counsel easy to follow?

We know that anxiety can have an impact - sometimes lasting - on our bodies, on our health. Yet, by simply acknowledging this, we cannot find a solution! Some worries are legitimate, and anxiety is not always rational. We not only live in anxious times, but our culture creates and propagates anxieties and fears.

Has the world ever been a worry-free place? When you think of 1968, for instance, what comes to your mind? This was a year of worldwide unrest: the civil rights movement in the USA, the protests of May 1968 in France, the Vietnam war, the Prague Spring ending with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia - to name only a few events. A year of various natural disasters including the Great Flood in France and England. A year of a flu pandemic with several million deaths. In 1968, the Earth was a worrisome place. Some would even say that things have since gone from bad to worse and that anxiety has become for many a perpetual state of mind.

The Gospel passage we've just heard comes towards the end of that long discourse of Jesus we call the “Sermon on the Mountain”. Some would say the Sermon sets the basic standard of Christian righteousness. It is a very high standard! The disciples are to be poor in spirit, meek, merciful, pure in heart, to hunger and thirst for justice, to be peacemakers, to give alms, to pray, to fast, to love one's enemies ... In short: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is

perfect.” Quite a challenge for someone who wants to be a faithful disciple. It could easily trigger the so-called ‘completion anxiety’, the worry that one will not or cannot perform well enough to meet the standards set by someone else, and by which one will be assessed.

“Do not worry about your life... do not worry about tomorrow...” One more command which anxiety-ridden disciples will struggle to achieve?

Many of us here, this morning, do not worry about tomorrow, about our food or our clothes. It was surely an unpleasant surprise, when, three years ago, during the lockdown, we were confronted with such fears, but all this is now behind us. Not often in our lives - if ever - have we experienced the devouring fears of those who live in areas hit by natural disasters or famine or war and cannot but worry about tomorrow. Not often - if ever - have we experienced the anxiety that discrimination and injustice and rejection can bring about. Nevertheless, we all have our smaller or bigger worries and they all come in the way of our living the life God has prepared for us. We would all like to have a life with no fears, or at least to know how to manage them.

Have you realized that Jesus encourages his disciples to read a book, namely the Book of Creation? “Look at the birds of the air ... Consider the lilies of the field...”

No doubt, spending time in green spaces or bringing nature into one’s everyday life can benefit one’s mental wellbeing and reduce stress levels. Watching birds and flowers has a calming effect and can take one, even for the briefest moment, out of their own anxiety-filled head. But Jesus is not offering an ecotherapy: he holds open the Book of Creation for his disciples to engage in a deeper reading and learning. What sort of book is this? How are we to read it? And what can we expect, as Christ’s disciples, to learn from it?

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we might find it difficult to agree with Maximus the Confessor, the 7<sup>th</sup> century monk, theologian, and scholar, for whom Creation and Scripture are equal in dignity and value, both equally essential for drawing us near to God. A reason for our disagreeing is that, over the last centuries, humankind had a growing preoccupation with reading nature in the language of mathematics that overshadowed other levels of interpretation. Maximus deeply believed that God has implanted in each created thing a ‘thought’ or ‘word’, God’s intention for it, the very essence of that thing, its meaning. “One shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt 4.4) and the Universe also is a word which comes from the mouth of God.

Jesus does not expect of his disciples a reading of creation that is scientific or intellectual, but one that is spiritual. Read creation with obedience - obedient receptivity to God's word, that involves a sense of wonder and an attitude of listening. Open all your senses to the wisdom expressed in things: mountains and beaches, weeds, worms and compost heaps, patterns in running water and in a spider's web - therein lies meaning which governs creation, and perhaps our lives as well.

If we recognise creation as charged with the words of God, this can radically change our attitude toward everything we touch. As Christians we speak often of ourselves as having been entrusted with stewardship over Creation - we should also develop the posture of a learner, of humble receptiveness to what creation can teach us. Our reading will keep sending us back with renewed awe to the book we hold in our hands.

This morning we heard - again - the very familiar creation story, the first pages in the Bible. So familiar that we don't really pay attention to it anymore. Do read it again! Even while looking at some colourful illustrations in a children's Bible, or at Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine chapel, or just going for a walk in the open. Hear the goodness and blessing which overflow from this world-affirming story. Against all negative and pessimistic philosophies and world-denying theologies and spiritualities, the book of Genesis affirms that the world is the good creation of our good God. The world's default setting is goodness. "God saw everything he has made, and indeed, it was very good."

At the end of 1968 - a worries-filled year for many people around the world - Apollo 8 was the first human spaceflight to reach the Moon. While orbiting the Moon, on Christmas Eve, the crew made a television broadcast: "We are now approaching lunar sunrise, and for all the people back on Earth, the crew of Apollo 8 has a message that we would like to send to you:

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.' They continued through the first 10 verses of Genesis. While observing the blue Earth rising in the Moon's sky, the three astronauts acknowledged with delight the goodness of the Creation and could have exclaimed, like Jacob, "Surely the Lord is in this place - and I did not know it." (Gen 28.16)

Christ's challenging and demanding Sermon on the Mountain is a revelation of hope and purpose and comfort. "Do not worry about your life!" Read in the Book

of Creation God's original blessing and the profound assurance of his care and goodness. In a world that does not seem to care, this comes as good news.

Amen.