

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

Sermon

Second Sunday before Lent - 12th February 2023

Eglise du Sacré-Coeur, Oppède

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I wonder what keeps you awake at night. Worrying, it seems, is part of the human condition. Our early ancestors were kept safe by their 'fight or flight' response, which we have inherited. The response is easily triggered, in some more easily than others.

The last time our readings today came in the church's three year Lectionary cycle we were days away from a global pandemic. Days away from a wave of anxiety encouraged by governments to keep people safe from infection. The after-effects of that anxiety are now beginning to be understood. Some have compared it to a form of post-traumatic stress response that has particularly affected young people. How can we, as parents, grandparents, godparents, best help them, and ourselves?

At the height of the pandemic, the naturalist Sir David Attenborough encouraged people to spend ten minutes a day looking at something in nature. He said it would calm their spirits, and it did. His advice in some ways was not

dissimilar to that of Christ to his followers, two thousand years earlier. 'Consider the lilies.'

In today's Gospel we hear Jesus telling his disciples very clearly: 'Do not worry' - three times in the course of a few sentences. He knew how much time we all waste in worrying about unimportant things. We are easily distracted from what matters most. We are also given a constant sense of what other people want us to believe our lives should be like – this food, these clothes. It takes self-discipline to give attention to Jesus's words: 'Isn't life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Don't strive for all this – instead, strive for God's kingdom, and his justice.'

The words which come immediately before this story in Matthew's Gospel are Jesus's advice to the disciples: 'No one can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and wealth.' There is deep truth in that. We all think that we need just a bit more, but the reality is that when we have a bit more, we think we need a bit more still. On the other hand, if our heart is set on the things of God, the things of Mammon start to fall away. If we start to care passionately about the welfare of another, we stop noticing any lack of our own.

The same is true if we feel passionately about a cause to do with justice, or human rights. We can end up putting all our energy into it, persuading others to join us, working hard to promote the outcome we are striving for, and all the while our own needs fall into the background. Striving for God's kingdom, and his justice.

Perhaps there are three things in particular that we can take away from Jesus's words in our Gospel this morning.

First, learning to live more in the moment. Many have discovered the benefits of this through the practice of mindfulness. It is based on the notion that if you can learn to live in the present and not be distracted by anxiety about the past or the future, you will live a more contented and peaceful life. The Christian faith actually helps us do this. For it assures us that we do not need to live burdened with regrets about the past, for the past has been forgiven, and we no longer need to be anxious about the future, for the future is about new life, resurrection. That leaves the present, in which we are offered fullness of life in God's beautiful creation. 'Consider the lilies.'

Where I live, the almond blossom is out on the trees, a first promise of Spring. It always reminds me of the words of the television writer Dennis Potter, written after he learned that he did not have long to live:

'I discover ... what you always know to be true, but you never know it till you know it. ... We're the one animal that knows we're going to die, and yet we carry on ... behaving as though [we will go on for ever]. And we ... forget that life can only be defined in the present tense; ... that nowness [has] become so vivid that ... I'm almost serene. ... I can celebrate life. Below my window ... the blossom is out in full now ... and looking at it, instead of saying "Oh that's nice blossom", ... I see it is the whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that there ever could be ... The nowness of everything is absolutely wondrous, and if [only] people could see that... the glory of it, ... the comfort of it, the reassurance ...'

Yet we don't do it nearly enough. Sadly, it can take a life-threatening illness to make us see it. 'Consider the lilies.'

The second thing Jesus's words teach us is to learn to trust God more. Learning to trust God is what, at their heart, the Scriptures are about. The Book of Genesis was written while the people of ancient Israel were in exile in Babylon. They thought they had lost everything. And so they wrote down their story, to remind them of the ways in which God had been good to them in the past and could be trusted through bad times as well as good.

They began telling the story 'in the beginning' – the opening words of the Bible, which we heard in our Old Testament reading. They went on to recall their liberation from slavery in Egypt, their receiving of the Law on Mount Sinai after wandering in the wilderness, and finally their entry into the promised land, their home. The prophets warned that if they drifted away from God they would lose the land. Later, from exile, they wrote joyfully of their promised return. The New Testament takes up the story – John's Gospel begins with the same words, 'In the beginning'. The Gospels tell of liberation, of Christ's teaching how to find peace and contentment - life in all its fullness – and through the death and resurrection of Jesus they end with a promise of ultimate homecoming, of life for ever with the one who created them in the beginning. The message of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is that we may place our trust in God.

The third thing Jesus's words teach us is to attend to our inner life, the life of the soul. The spiritual writer Richard Rohr notes that each of us lives within three levels of meaning. First, my story; my life; my possessions. Jesus teaches us to

let go of this level in order to find our deeper and truer life and security. Secondly, our story; our group, family, community, church. We all need to belong, so this level of meaning is important. It's about being the Body of Christ. Finally, there is the story, the level of ultimate meaning. Jesus is always (including in today's Gospel) drawing us towards this level of sacred identity, to find our true identity and security in the transcendent love of God.

In summary, when Jesus tells us not to worry, he is not advising us to be irresponsible about our everyday personal and family responsibilities. Instead, he challenges us to find a deeper security – the life of the soul – from which we can deal with those responsibilities wisely and joyfully. Part of what coming to church is about is the search for that deeper truth, that deeper security, in order to discern what's important and what not, what to worry about and what not.

So let us make time for God, go deep within ourselves to find God's silent spaciousness. And from that place will come the security and strength to live with joy and freedom, finding a love that will sustain us whatever we have to go through – and to ensure that our priorities are wise ones.

Three things. Learning to live in the present. Learning to trust God. Learning to attend to our inner lives to find deeper security and strength. That's not bad advice to offer to children, grandchildren, godchildren. 'Consider the lilies.'

Amen.