

February 12 2023 St Mary's Woodbridge Gen 1.1-2.4; Matt 6: 35-34

A few years ago I stumbled across an old school report which my parents had mysteriously kept. It was from my next to last year in primary school, so I would have been 10. The report, as I remember it, was not bad, but the teacher chose to comment that I would do better if I was less anxious.

So you will appreciate that I have found Jesus' words, "do not worry" which appear a dozen times in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, including three times alone in this passage, a particular comfort for most of my life.

But I had to learn that Jesus was not just offering a bit of sensible advice to an overly anxious school boy and to that same hopefully slightly less anxious person nearly 60 years later. And the clue to that can be found in three words in this passage.

First word, and in fact the first word of the gospel reading. "Therefore". Now I've never quite understood some of the choices that the lectionary composers have made for our Sunday readings. And this is a case in point. "Therefore" presumes that you know what has just come before. But last Sunday's gospel reading is pretty much a whole chapter earlier than today's passage, so remembering that (Jesus was talking about being salt and light) doesn't much help.

So what *was* he talking about? I ask, anxiously! Well, in the verses just before – and remember we are in the Sermon on the Mount – Jesus has just given his hearers the Lord's Prayer, praying, as we do, amongst other petitions, that

God's Kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. Then he teaches about the importance of forgiveness, and of fasting in secret so no one knows you are doing it. And then that we should not gather treasures on earth where moth and rust consume but instead store up treasure in heaven. "For where your treasure is there will your heart be also." And after a few words about the eye as the lamp of the body, he declares, "No one can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and money."

And then he says, therefore, do not worry what you are to eat or drink or wear..." So not worrying is about getting our priorities and our attachments right.

And we realise of course that not only is this not just general advice for the anxiety prone, nor is it an appalling pious instruction to the poor and starving as some would have it, but direction to his followers, his disciples, so to us, to serve God and not be distracted by our own needs, our own preoccupations, what we think is important for us – all of which do have the incredible capacity to draw us away from God and to dominate our concerns.

If you are thinking at all about the events of General Synod this past week, and this will be my only reference, I was struck that through the church's self-preoccupation that dominated the week, there was barely a reference to the horrific earthquake in Turkey and Syria. I know as individuals we were and are desperately concerned, but as a collective body this barely touched us – even in the daily prayers. I'm not sure that is heeding Jesus' "therefore".

Not worrying means getting our priorities the right way round and not focussing on ourselves but on others.

Jesus drives his point home in this passage by comparing our preoccupations with vanity and self-importance, of striving for recognition and security, comparing that with the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, who neither reap nor sow nor toil nor spin.

And so we come to our second word. “Consider” he says, and this is not just “have a look at” but study deeply and learn from the birds and the plants. Look at how nature works, or, we need to add today, is intended to work without our interference.

We are drawn here to the backdrop of the Creation, the first of the biblical narratives of which we heard this morning.

In the book of Job we are reminded that God provides for the ravens; the Psalmist reminds us the God provides food for the animals and water for the trees. We know of course that nature does not always behave this way, and we know that we are the appalling cause of much of that.

I want to congratulate you on being awarded the Eco Bronze Award, and to thank Rita James for her hard work in helping you achieve this, and she told me before the service that she is looking forward to achieving the Silver award.

The point is that nature works when not disrupted and the plants are watered and the birds are fed. Just so, says Jesus, if you focus on God who is the

foundation and fount of all life, the giver and sustainer of all, if you focus your life on God and not on yourself, you will find you have just what you need, and no need to worry.

In the world I live, the world of the church, I have learned that over the decades. Somehow, when I least expect it, and in ways I had not imagined, God provides what the parish – when I was a vicar – or the college – when I was principal of a theological college – or now, the diocese, God somehow provides what we need. And it comes from trusting God, trusting the one who is the creator and sustainer of everything.

Therefore; Consider; and now the third word – First. First, seek the Kingdom of God. Our translation this morning is not helpful – “strive” is not a good translation of the Greek which does mean seek, look for. The danger of “strive” is that it slips us into that heresy that we build or have a part in building God’s Kingdom. We pray for its coming, we look for it, we join it, but it is God’s kingdom and not ours to build or even strive about. It is God’s reality and God’s gift.

But the important word here is “first.” What do we do first as Christians? What is the front of our minds and hearts, and steers and guides our actions, our demeanour? What is first for us? Jesus says, it is first, to seek God’s kingdom – on earth as it is in heaven.

There is something subtle about this, about letting go of our own selfish priorities and seeking those of God’s justice, mercy and peace.

It's a bit like falling in love. When we are desperate to fall in love or finding friends, focussed on ourselves, it doesn't happen. When we turn outwards and focus on others, lo and behold friends, even love, appears.

Therefore. Consider. First. the Kingdom of God. Where does that leave the anxious ten year old turned slightly less anxious 68 year old? Learning to seek God's Kingdom first isn't easy. There are plenty of distractions. Yet those moments when I have been able to let go of my own self-preoccupations, are moments of clarity and gift. And that clarity and gift means not to focus on my own needs, but those of others. And for the church not to focus on herself, but on the needs of the world, a world where God's kingdom of justice and mercy and peace is there, if only we looked for it, and stopped looking at ourselves. And indeed for the Church of England to be less concerned about its internal life and more concerned about the people of this land.

During the pandemic the churches across Suffolk and elsewhere discovered what "therefore consider first the Kingdom of God" meant. It meant continuing to pray and to worship, whatever the obstacles, and reaching out in loving, self-giving service for those in need. And of course during this cost of living crisis it means the same. And it has always meant that and always will. Loving God and loving neighbour. I am grateful to the six being recommissioned as Lay Elders this morning, who will in various ways live this out in practice.

A few weeks ago I saw my wise Jesuit spiritual director. I talked to him about being anxious – so it hasn't completely gone away! – anxious about the state of

the church. He asked me the simple question, had I taken this into my prayer. Well, of course I hadn't as bizarre and obvious as that may seem. And when I did, the anxiety evaporated. It's God's church, and my role is not to rescue it but to seek the Kingdom of God in and through it.

So self-giving service, worship, and prayer are the heart of how we therefore consider first the kingdom of God. And here, in this liturgy, in this eucharist, where we are faced with the utter selflessness of God in giving himself to us on the cross and so in bread and wine. We put our hands out to receive him, knowing that, as he does with the birds of the air, he feeds us. And in that moment we receive all we need, and we hear Jesus say to us once again, do not worry.