



Revd Ro's Reflection on Second Sunday before Lent

Year A

Romans 8.18-25

Matthew 6.25-34

²⁵ 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life,' (Matthew 6)

I must admit I have to smile when I read this. I always think of a lovely humorous poem by Joyce Grenfell called 'The Terrible Worrier.' Mrs Moss, the lady of the title, worries about everything, even the raffle prize she might win at a W.I. do. After all, if she won the holiday to Madeira she 'might have to go!' Actually she wins a rabbit and not knowing what to do with the corpse she posts it through the window of a parked mini. Then of course she worries in case someone saw her do it! The whole poem is like that and is hilarious; especially if you see it performed as I once did in Maureen Lipman's excellent tribute called 'Re-Joyce.' I also have to admit to feeling a bit guilty too when I read the passage. I am a 'terrible worrier' – no doubt about it, though not, I hope, as bad as Mrs Moss. I think that some of us just naturally are rather like that, just as some people enjoy early morning while others are at their best at night. In a way we can't help our makeup. To understand the passage we have to go a bit deeper into not only what Jesus says here but the context of the passage. Indeed any passage which begins, 'Therefore' leads us back to what has gone before. Last time we were looking at a passage from Matthew 5, part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, this passage has moved on to Matthew 6.25+ so it's very important to know what Jesus has been saying to the crowds prior to this.

Chapter 6 begins in this way with a warning against showing off and ostentatious religious piety.

^{6.1} 'Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² 'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'

There is no place here for blowing your own trumpet, for showing off to others just how 'religious' you are. Jesus condemns it as false. Just who are you wanting to please if you do that? It's certainly not God. Your belief, your faith, your prayer, must be between you and God in a close, personal relationship. God is our creator, our Father who knows every hair of our head, our thoughts and our feelings. So any relationship with him must be based on prayer and love, as it says in Psalm 4 v4, 'Stand in awe and sin not, commune with your own heart upon your bed and be still.'

In fact in the next part of the sermon Jesus says just this.

⁵ 'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'

It is here that Jesus turns his attention specifically to prayer,

⁷ 'When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.'

I think the key here is that God knows our needs before we ask. Yet we must praise and worship and bring our needs and those of others to him in the deep personal relationship that true prayer is, as St. Paul puts it in the passage just after our epistle reading.

²⁶ 'Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.'

I just love that phrase, 'sighs too deep for words.' Sometimes it is good to simply be still in God's presence and 'commune with him and our own hearts.' In Matthew it is at this point that Jesus tells them how to pray by giving them 'The Lord's Prayer.' All this is not preamble, it is vital if we are to understand what is happening here. What immediately precedes our passage is Jesus' teaching about attitudes to life and particularly to the acquisition of money. His question is quite simply where is your focus? It is a challenge to every one of us.

¹⁹ 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'

This is not about walking around with our heads in the clouds as if life wasn't real and earnest. It is about getting our priorities right. 'There will your heart be also,' is a key phrase. I like the television drama, 'Call the Midwife,' though I have been known to make a cup of tea during the gory bits! In the area of Poplar where the series is set, life is indeed real and earnest. The nurses and midwives, some of whom are nuns, are battling not only disease and poverty but they are acting through God's love and seeking to bring compassion into a tough world. Last night's episode contrasted that with the businessman who was interested only in money and whose slum tenements caused human suffering on a huge scale. He was blind to the people and saw only the profit he could make by selling the slums over the people's heads. Meanwhile Sister Julienne voices Jesus' words and her own attitude and belief by confronting the Councillor whose threat is to close their organisation down by saying, 'There must be room for love.' His answer was a chilling one. 'No there is not!'

When money, or so called efficiency or love of power, replaces God's love as acted out in lives, then things are dire indeed and humanity has lost its way. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is all about showing people the right way to live by putting God at the centre and his teachings being their guide. He sums it up by saying, in the passage that immediately precedes our reading,

²⁴ 'No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.'

Having examined what has gone before we have set the scene for today's reading and can understand it more easily. If we have a close relationship with God, if we pray to him, trust him and have faith in his love and care for us, then that should steer our behaviour, our attitudes in life and to each other.

²⁵ 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? 'Therefore,' because of what I have told you, change your focus. Life isn't just about hand to mouth subsistence. It's not just looking after the body. It's not about chasing after money. Your relationship with God must be at the centre of your lives. That is what Jesus means when he asks the rhetorical question 'Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?' Of course our lives are and if not then they should be! This is not a list of instructions; it's a challenge to every one of us. It's a wakeup call. Once again it's counter cultural too. People were and still are, used to measuring success in terms of money and status. Jesus' answer to that attitude is to turn it on its head. To make that your focus is to risk losing sight of what is really important, God.

²⁶ 'Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?'

You can just imagine Jesus on the hillside, pointing to the surrounding beauty to illustrate what he said. This morning I was in the garden and was delighted when I found a group of snowdrops, tiny, delicate and perfect; just a little thread holding the head to the stem but able to withstand a storm that could down an oak tree. Jesus is talking to people living in an occupied country; some would be fisherman or subsistence farmers. For them life could be nasty, brutish and short. There are no platitudes here, Jesus knew all about hardship and oppression. He would be executed at the age of only 33 by the spite of the Jews and the power of oppressors. There is something stronger than all of that though; God, the creator, and the focus must be him.

If we look at our world today it's easy to despair. Starvation, war and plague have led to suffering and loss of life on a colossal scale in just the last three years. That is without the economic crisis and the suffering that has added to it. To say, 'Do not worry,' may sound crazy in this atmosphere but Jesus was no stranger to these circumstances himself.

²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

That first question hits the nail on the head. Worrying about it won't help, it just adds to troubles. Ambulance workers, nurses and doctors during COVID must have been afraid but it did not prevent them working to save lives in compassion.

²⁸ 'And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?'

Life is, or should be a partnership with God. He has given us a beautiful world; we should be custodians and guardians of it; as the hymn says; 'We but stewards of thy bounty, held in solemn

trust for thee.’ We must trust in the God who loves us and put him at the front of our lives. The trouble is people have rebelled, have turned their back on God, indeed, that is what the word ‘despair’ means. They have put other idols first, desire for power, control, wealth. They have wrecked the earth’s beauty and are in danger of destroying it and themselves. Life is in crisis. But to simply worry about it isn’t the answer. Of course we are concerned; we are concerned about our lives and those of others. But we need to trust in God, know that the Holy Spirit is with us and whatever happens, we dust ourselves down and go on in God’s strength and in absolute trust in him. Notice how Jesus ends that quotation, ‘you of little faith.’ Stop thinking you are acting in your own strength. Stop focusing on yourself all the time. God knows what you need; work then in his name in his strength. Make God your focus and then do your best for him in your lives. If everyone did that, if they lived by the Kingdom values there would be no more war.

³¹ ‘Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?”’ ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ ‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.’

I think the last sentence is the key.

Life is real, life is earnest, it is often tough and distasteful but simply do the best you can and face each day as it comes. Worry gets in the way and it means you are not trusting in God’s strength and his love for you. Jesus is demanding a change of attitude, a change of focus. What have we to strive for, apart from doing our best in our lives and our work? Jesus gives the answer,

³³ ‘But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.’

Jesus stands before his people, he stands before us and he calls. Will you turn to me; and put God at the centre in love and trust? Will you put the kingdom values at the centre of your lives and have the courage to live them out? If you do then the Kingdom of God will come on earth as in heaven. Have we the courage to stand with sister Julienne and facing opposition say, ‘There must be room for love.’

In a way the passage from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans is equally a challenge. Just prior to today’s reading he writes

¹⁴ ‘For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.’

It’s important to think about who Paul’s readers are. These new Christians living in and around Rome live in perilous times, to confess Jesus as the only Lord is to deny Caesar as Lord. Jesus is Lord and God, Caesar is not. Persecution and suffering is very, very real. In the face of danger and death it must have been a temptation to forsake their new belief and way of life.

But Paul says you have been baptised into the church of Jesus Christ who is stronger than any earthly power. You have the Spirit of God within you to strengthen and sustain you. Not only that, because you confess Jesus Christ as Lord and saviour you are brothers and sisters of Christ, children of a loving heavenly Father and co-heirs with Christ. You will receive all the benefits of God’s grace.

Paul is not trying to deny the suffering they risk and indeed endure, it's very real and there is not much Paul doesn't know about suffering. But Paul's point is it pales into insignificance when put against the glory and wonder of God's plan for the world and for them as Christians.

¹⁸ 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us'.

Notice that, 'the glory about to be revealed to us'. Here Paul is not pointing simply to individual salvation through Christ; he looks beyond this to a glory to be revealed to all believers. The passage goes on to look at this.

¹⁹ 'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God;'

There is great hope here, all creation in this metaphor, is holding its breath in eager anticipation of God's action and the revealing of all who will share in the restored creation.

What follows is difficult,

²⁰ 'for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.'

It is open to interpretation, God is in control of all things, and God is creator. Human beings were given the stewardship of this beautiful world. What has happened is that human beings, who have God given free will, have failed dismally in that stewardship. They have used the earth only as a commodity. They have spoiled the earth for their own gains and the result is clear. God allowed this to happen but he is in ultimate control and the whole of creation will be restored by him to the perfection intended. Humanity, all who turn to him in love, will be a part of this new kingdom with Christ as ruler of all.

It is strange that in the first part of this reflection I mentioned the programme; 'Call the midwife' Paul uses the metaphor of birth.

²² 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.'

It is a great metaphor and Jesus uses it as he speaks to his disciples,

²¹ When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. ²² So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.'

The birth process is painful and traumatic, the woman in pain thinks it's never going to be over she just can't stand it. A face full of pain is transformed to joy, wonder and love as she holds her child in her arms. The pain is over, she delights in her baby.

It is like that now, says Paul. The whole of creation is writhing in agony; it's like the process of labour. You are suffering too. But creation, a glorious newly restored creation will come in God's time and the suffering will end just as a new life comes into the world at a birth.

²⁴ 'For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?'

²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.'

I want to carry on with the birth image for just a moment more. My friend is having a baby, she is waiting in hope but she has decided not to know the sex of her child. Her hope is for a healthy infant and she is happy to wait for it. It is a very special time of hope, fearful too until the baby is in her arms. Hope is a very special thing; it is like the expectation that comes when as children we look

forward to an exciting event or surprise. If we knew for sure it would happen it wouldn't really be hope. So this is what hope is like. We cannot know what God's recreated glorious order will be like; we do not know when it will come. But come it will, of that we can be sure and so we wait and trust in faith and patience assured of his love.

We do not do this in our own strength says Paul in verse 26

²⁶ 'Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.'

It is a beautiful verse. God knows that human beings need help and the Holy Spirit is within us to strengthen and sustain us. Even in our prayer it is the Spirit who, 'intercedes with sighs too deep for words.'

I admit I find that one of the most beautiful phrases in scripture.

'Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you. Alleluia.' Karen Lafferty

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