

Sermon preached at Wymondham Abbey Harvest Festival 2024

Matthew 6.25-33

'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? 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? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 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? Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.'

There was once a Schools Inspector in Yorkshire called Gervase Phinn, who published a brilliant set of stories from his time going round primary schools, especially at Christmas time – a time ripe with happy accidents, usually during the annual Nativity play. In one, a tiny girl canters to the front of the stage, her job being to introduce the performance. Whether out of terror or forgetfulness or just simple mischief she says, 'Welcome to our.... Harvest Festival!'

Well this *is* Harvest Festival, and like at Christmas, it's a time for gratitude, thanksgiving for the food we enjoy, in all its plenty and variety. Mind you, we know that there is also hunger in this country, in this very town (hence the Foodbank in the Abbey Hall and our collecting for it) – and that is quite simply scandalous in such a rich country. A friend of mine, who had been a priest in London and then went to Lancashire told me that in London he was used to seeing lots of children living with obesity in his parish, which was very deprived, thanks to the cheap processed food they were eating. When he went to a school on his arrival in a certain Lancashire city, he said quietly to a teacher 'these are Year 4's, presumably'. 'No', she replied, 'they're Year 6's'. They were so poor and hungry that they were physically underdeveloped. In the UK...

But of course the depths of hunger, malnutrition and death-dealing want across the world really can defy our comprehension. According to UN figures, getting on for 10% of the world's population were hungry in 2022, and the prediction is that some 600 million people will be chronically undernourished by 2030. The reasons for this are complex, and can often seem frustratingly intractable. Very often the cause is war, or the greed of the powerful, or corrupt government. And now, more and more, the cause of hunger (or an exacerbating factor) is the changing climate. As man-made climate change cranks up, visibly now, the poorest in the world are disproportionately harmed and further disadvantaged.

By happy providence, we have just had the feast day of St Francis of Assisi. Eight hundred years ago – that long! - he was teaching a way of thinking about God, about the world and about each other that is as radical now as it was then. Our modern day Francis, the Pope, sums him up in these words:

He loved, and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his openheartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature

and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.

That is from Pope Francis' encyclical letter on the environment, 'Laudato si', published in 2015. The title itself is a quote from S Francis, in his famous 'Canticle of the Creatures'. *Laudato si', mi signore: 'Praise to you, my Lord'.*

The essence of Pope Francis' argument is that when we contemplate what God has given us, in the fullness of his creation, our response only *begins* with praise and thanksgiving. It is empty piety if left at that. Because from the very earliest pages of the Bible we learn that God's gift of creation and his boundless love of us make some very real demands of us. Dominion means stewardship and care, not exploitation. How do we look after that creation, which includes each other and those who come after us? Francis argues pretty uncompromisingly that this also goes beyond pious good will and hand-wringing. We need to understand the complexity of what is happening, listen to science and experts in the field, listen to the real stories of real people, and work for solutions which combine a Christlike heart with a Christlike, prophetic commitment to the truth of things and to actual action. For most of us that's going to mean, as the saying goes, 'think global, act local'.

The gospel reading today is full of encouragement and hope, *and* tells us how to realise that hope and escape from anxiety – which can be very real, of course. Indeed, when Jesus says 'don't worry', it isn't some blithe, empty, polyanna-ish remark. He knows how horrible life can be, but is telling us that the horror will not win out. I think it helps to imagine Jesus actually saying it to you. What it would be like to have *him* saying it to you.

Another bit of the encouragement in Jesus' words comes when he talks about the lilies of the field. *Even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these*, he says. That suggests that God does not just love us, but that we are beautiful in his eyes. Whatever our shortcomings, whatever our crippling anxieties or anger, God loves us beyond our wildest imaginings.

And then Jesus tells us how we can realise this hope, concretely. *Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you.* It's too easy, too Sunday School, to think this just means in some vague way be a good Christian, say your prayers, believe the right things.... If we're going to strive for the kingdom, we do well to remember what the king has to say in Jesus' great parable of judgment in Matthew 25, the Judgment of the Nations (the sheep and the goats story). Those who have pleased the king, who have – we can say - striven for the kingdom say *"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ... saw you a stranger and welcomed you, ... naked and gave you clothing? ... saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"* And the king will answer them, *"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*

Each of us can and must do this, this striving. We don't do it alone, but with God's help. So with his help let us channel the energy of our Harvest thanksgiving into an active love of the hungry, the frightened and the needy, wherever we meet them.