



## **All Saints' Marseille**

### **Sermon**

**Sunday, 16<sup>th</sup> February 2020**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday before Lent**

**Year A: Genesis 1.1-2.3; Romans 8.18-25; Matthew 6.25-34**

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Last week after the service I went up to the Luberon for a meeting of our Chaplaincy Council. It was a bright sunny day and the almond blossom was beginning to show on the trees in the valleys, the first promise of Spring. It was heart-stoppingly beautiful, and I was reminded of the words of the television writer Dennis Potter, which he wrote after he had 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 paying our mortgages, doing our jobs, moving about, behaving as though [we will go on for ever]. And we ... tend to forget that life can only be defined in the present tense; it is ... now only..., and that nowness [has] become so vivid that ... I'm almost serene. You know, 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... There's no way of telling you; you have to experience it, but the



glory of it, ... the comfort of it, the reassurance ... The fact is, if you see the present tense, boy do you see it! And boy can you celebrate it.'

'The glory of it, the comfort, the reassurance.' 'I am almost serene.'

'Consider the lilies.' In today's Gospel we hear Jesus telling his disciples very clearly: 'Do not worry.' He says it three times in the course of a few sentences. He knew how much time we waste in worrying, and how many more important ways there are for us to fill our time. We are so easily distracted from what matters most. The society we live in encourages us to be distracted. There was another statistic last week about the number of hours young people spend on their screens each day – and, let's face it, grown-ups. (Hands up anyone who doesn't check their phone first thing in the morning and last thing at night.) We are bombarded with information about things we don't need to know about, and given a constant sense of what other people want us to believe our lives should be like – this food, these clothes, this house, this car. It takes a lot of self-discipline to step back and hear 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.'

There are other things that worry us, entirely naturally, apart from food and clothes – illness, to name but one. We (or at least our media) are in the grip of that sort of anxiety at the moment. But when we are really ill, we realise that however much we may try to feel in control of our lives, we are not, and it can be daunting to discover. Yet Jesus says: 'Do not worry about your life. Your heavenly Father knows what you need. But strive first for the kingdom of God, and his justice.' He reminds his disciples, and us, that the God who takes so much



care over making a flower or a bird will take even more care over human beings, made as they are in his image. Yet the simplicity of the lifespan of a flower helps us to pause and reflect. All a flower does is to follow the pattern given to it, putting all its energy into growing into what it is designed to be. Unlike a flower, as humans we can choose where we put our energy. But we too will find our lives most fulfilled when we grow into the people God wants us to be. It means allowing God to rule in our lives, rather than anything or anyone else.

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, and a bit more after that. The reality is that it's greed at work, which in the church's tradition was identified as one of the seven deadly sins – something that can get out of control and take over our lives, causing us misery. It doesn't stop, unless we can alter our mindset, our heart-set. 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. We know this from falling in love, as Valentine's Day may have reminded us last week. When you love someone, you don't think twice about putting their needs first. It's one of life's most beautiful mysteries.

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 in the cause, giving all we can, working all the hours there are 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.



In this passage Jesus is also exhorting us to learn to live more in the moment. Ironically, as fewer people now go to church where they might hear this Gospel read, many have begun to encounter the same truth through the concept of mindfulness, which has become very popular. It is based on the notion that if you can learn to live in the present moment and not be distracted by anxiety about the past or the future, you will become able to live a more contented and relaxed life. One of the striking things about the Christian faith is that it actually helps us to do this. For it assures us that we no longer 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 resurrection, new life. That just leaves the present, in which we are offered fullness of life in God's beautiful creation. '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.'

It could be said that learning to trust the God who is faithful is what, at its heart, Scripture is about. Does anyone know when the Book of Genesis was written, and why? It was actually written while the people of ancient Israel were in exile in Babylon. They thought they had lost everything – land, possessions, freedom, even the ability to worship the God whose people they understood themselves to be. 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. To remind the exiles that God, and not the tribal deities of the Babylonian empire, was ultimately in control, watching over his creation, and that he would bring it to well-being.



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 New Testament then 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 they end with a promise of ultimate homecoming. In our final hymn this morning we will celebrate just that.

So as we prepare for the weeks of Lent ahead, beginning in ten days’ time, when in our imaginations we will share with our Lord a time of wilderness, then accompany him on his journey through Passiontide and Holy Week, before we see unleashed again the astonishing power of his resurrection, let us give thanks for the God who nurtures and sustains us, the God who is faithful to us in good times and in bad, whose love for us overflows each day. And let us learn not to worry, but to notice the blossom.

Amen.