

Harvest Thanksgiving – Sunday 3rd October 2021

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"If God clothes the grass... will he not much more clothe you?"

Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel passage this Harvest Festival morning, is here, undoubtedly, in full Rabbinic teaching mode. How do we know this?

Well, for one thing, Matthew is, if you like, our fully-paid-up Hebrew gospel writer. His record of Jesus' earthly ministry - biblical scholars are clear - is wholly based on Jewish theology, doctrine, culture and tradition. Second, Jesus - as Matthew reports - uses a classic Rabbinic teaching tool. "If such-and-such is the case (which it clearly is)... then how much more would such-and such a thing be true?"

For those interested in these things, the technical rabbinic scholarly tool for this method of teaching is called: *kal v'chomer* : From something light, to something with greater weight, as it were.

So in our passage this morning, we can surely imagine Rabbi Jesus sitting, with his disciples at his feet in rapt attention.

Sitting to teach was the classic scholarly approach of the time. It was the way great rabbis and teachers taught in Jesus' day - a practice going all the way back to Socrates and Plato and the like.

Jesus was, in effect, the professor of theology gathering his keen students around him and offering them great insight, wisdom, instruction.

And instruction is very much the right word in this instance, as we shall see...

"Do not worry" says Jesus to his disciples, "about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear..."

The word worry, in our 21st century context can hold any number of meanings. To be concerned, to be fretful, for example. We worry about our family, our health, our finances, our future. Whether we can get any petrol today, or whether the lorry will deliver my favourite sparkling water to the supermarket.

All of them, of course, to a greater or lesser degree, entirely valid concerns. We are right, sometimes, to worry.

But these are, if you like, worldly concerns. For our, and our loved-ones', physical well-being and peace of mind. And, of course, that is perfectly appropriate as far as it goes.

Our passage today certainly does suggest to us that we should try (usually in vain) not to worry about such things, but trust that God has our best interests at heart and loves us. This is often how we read this passage and have it preached to us. However the meaning of the word 'worry' that Jesus uses here rises to another level all together.

The word the original Greek New Testament word translates as 'worry' is actually closer in meaning to the word 'anxiety'.

'Do not be anxious'. This word is borrowed from the Latin 'angere' - which means, amongst other things, to choke. As it happens, the original Old English and Old German word that over time became our 'worry' has a similar meaning to that of anxiety: to strangle.

This leads us to the idea closely related to one element in Jesus' powerful parable of the sower. Some seeds land on good earth, but weeds appear alongside them as they grow and strangle the good plants, choking them.

So now we are getting to a theme. 'Do not prioritise our worldly concerns over and above keeping our eyes and our lives firmly focused on God'. For worldly concerns are often weeds which will get in the way of one's mind dwelling on God and God's kingdom. In other words: seek first the Kingdom of God. First. Above all things.

Jesus is not here in our passage today, therefore, telling the disciples to simply 'try not to worry so much'. He is not some kind of latter-day lifestyle coach. He is actually teaching, instructing even, his disciples as to the better way to go about their daily lives. In fact, one might even call it a command: stop wasting so much time on worry when there are more important things to focus on. Although, of course, Jesus understands that we do, and must sometimes, worry - and being a loving and gentle teacher does not put it quite as starkly as that. Nevertheless, it is an instruction, not just lifestyle guidance.

The word disciple - since we are dwelling on the meaning of words this morning - has the same root as discipline. The disciples sitting at Jesus' feet, and we, are Christians are in training. They and we are learning how to be a follower of Christ. And Jesus is our teacher, our instructor. Which is why he goes on to say that they, and we, are people of little faith.

Now, once again, we are prone to misunderstand the meaning of this phrase, too. 'Little faith' implies comparison. 'My faith isn't very strong - whereas yours is' or, 'I wish I had your faith' - kind of thing. This is a 21st century Western comparative fallacy. Good, better, best is learned from infancy and reinforced by our experiences at school - our failures compared with our peers' successes. Because of which in adult life we are, for example, continually at the mercy of advertising's aspirational propaganda. Those 'keeping up with the Joneses' learned behaviours that have no relevance here.

I believe that when Jesus says his disciples have little faith in this context he's actually saying - you are just starting out. Your faith is at present a tiny seed. But it will grow. And it will bear much fruit. But, for this to happen, it's best that you spend as little time being distracted by your worldly concerns, and concentrate every day instead on God and the Kingdom of God.

It's what I call God's economy. And why this passage is especially relevant to our harvest festival celebration this morning.

For, if we give over as much of our time as possible to dwelling on God thoughts and God's ways and dwelling within God's Kingdom - which is both here and yet to come - then everything else will fall into place as a matter of course.

More: if we leave ourselves open to God's abundance, our cup will run over and we will therefore be able to share that abundance with others. With our family, friends, loved ones and the wider community.

Bringing our harvest gifts to church is just such a symbol of this overflowing of God's abundance in our lives. And will always be, Jesus teaches, as a result of our abiding in God and God abiding in us.

So this day, as every day, the best way we can live godly lives, grow in faith, and offer the fruits of that faith to others, is not to allow ourselves to be choked by the weeds of everyday concerns. How many of our worries actually come to pass, anyway?

So why do we spend so much time on it, when we could be spending it, so to speak, with Jesus?

By all means we must ensure the health and wellbeing of ourselves and others. It is right and proper to put reasonable measures in place to do this. But once we have put them in place, Jesus teaches that we should try to set such concerns aside and get back to the most important work we can do in this life.

To do as the disciples do. Do as Mary did. Sit at Jesus' feet and listen as he teaches us greater and greater truths. For his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

Thanks be to God. Amen