

Second Sunday before Lent, 16th Feb 2020

1 Timothy 6:2-10; Matthew 6:25-end

Consider the Lilies...

Don't worry, says Jesus. Don't worry about what you're going to eat, or how you're going to clothe yourself, or put a roof over your head. Look at the birds, look at the flowers: they're not anxious. They don't work themselves to death. And yet your Heavenly Father feeds them.

So let us then consider the birds. Something that doesn't seem to have occurred to Jesus is that birds do go extinct, all the time. Currently about 10% of all bird species are threatened with extinction – not least, by the way, through starvation. If the birds aren't worried, then they should be.

Another thing that irks me about this passage. You'll sometimes hear Christians telling stories about how they decided not to worry about how something in their life would work out – maybe it was not having a job or a house or enough money for a project – and they decided not to worry about it, just to trust God. And lo and behold, there's a happy ending. The need was just miraculously met. I'm afraid I'm deeply sceptical. I can't deny that it might work that way, sometimes – but most of time it doesn't. There have been plenty of good, believing, trusting Christians who have starved to death. Is their problem that they didn't trust God *enough*? Or in quite the right way? I think we have to be grown up and realise that God usually doesn't sort everything out. That's not how reality works.

So this passage is what I call a 'yes, but' passage. You know you're meant to agree with it, because Jesus said it and He is after all the Great Teacher. So you say, 'yes, yes' of course. The 'buts' though come flying in very quickly – the kind of but's I've just been outlining above. But this is unrealistic, but birds *do* starve, but flowers don't need pensions, but how will I live? And there are so many 'buts' and frankly they're all so reasonable that you begin to forget the 'yes' – you begin to forget that Jesus really is the Great Teacher, and that there must be *something* in this passage that you really need to hear and not argue with.

And that something, I think, is this. Jesus looks around him, and what he sees is people driven by anxiety. At the most obvious level, it's for material things: for food and shelter and clothing. And we know of course that many people are obsessed by material things way beyond what they actually need. These people – and perhaps it's us – have to have more and more and more. They're desperate to accumulate, to pile up possessions: to be comfortable, to be glamorous, to be secure. The concept of 'enough' doesn't seem to apply.

Not everyone is like that of course. Let's assume – for one dangerous moment – that we're not, that gross materialism is not our problem. It might be for those greedy, flashy, rich types over there, not us. Well, the Bible says, be careful. Take the log out of your own eye first before you criticise the speck in other people's. If wealth isn't your problem, something else probably is. There's something else driving you, something else you're striving for, something else that Jesus looks at you for and says, consider the lilies. You need to relax. You need to stop chasing that, you need to give it up. It may not be big houses and lots of money, but it's the same driving anxiety, and it's killing you.

So it could be, for instance, your personal pride in how you do your job. Maybe you're a teacher, and your whole sense of vocation and self-worth and who you are is bound up with doing your very, very best for your students – pouring yourself into it, marking the books, planning the lessons, giving your all. Money doesn't really come into it – you do this because ... because why? Because it's good. And because doing it well tells you that you're good, that you make a difference, that your life is of value. Your perfectionism is meeting a deep, deep anxiety, way down in your heart: tell me I'm worthwhile. Tell me I matter. And of course it's not just teachers. This is how vicars think. This is how parents think. How people who slog their guts out as volunteers think, how astonishingly rich rock-stars think. It's how we *all* think, in our own unique ways. All driven, driven by the need to establish that we're worthwhile, that our lives matter.

Because you see, deep down, we're really not sure that they do. That's why Jesus asks just the question he does about all this anxiety: 'can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?' He's putting his finger on the heart of what's wrong. Why are we so anxious? Why are we so driven to prove that we count? Because at some level, whether we consciously think about it very much or not, we know we're going to die. And, consciously or not, it scares us witless. One day, I will not be. How do I cope with that terrifying knowledge? The most common way is to ignore it, to distract myself however I can. To frantically not think about it, to fill up my time and my mind with anything else. And at some level knowing, at some level denying that I'll soon disappear, I try desperately to make my mark – to prove that despite it all I matter. That's what underlies our anxiety, our striving. That's why we have people in love with wealth. That's why we have workaholics. That's why we have people who wear themselves out helping others. We're all in our different ways trying to deal with the fear of death.

And of course none of it works. The fear of death, and death itself, is so all powerful, so all-consuming, that no amount of performance, no amount of achievement of any sort is able to meet it. That's why there's no point in telling a workaholic, say, to relax – because they can never, ever do enough. It's not about the work, it's about the fear. Which is why Jesus says that the only real cure is something else entirely: seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness.

Seek ye first the kingdom of God. You will not be able to take your money, your achievement, your performance with you when you go. It will all vanish like smoke. The one thing that endures, that will bring you through death and out the other side is your relationship with God. That's what your focus should be on. Forget your job, forget your reputation, forget making your mark – well, don't forget them, because they're not **un**important, but put them in their right place. The biggest thing, the most important thing, the only thing which makes all the others not a cruel joke is your relationship with God. Seek that, says Jesus, and you'll live. Make that the centre of your life, and like the birds and the flowers you'll be at last what you were made to be.

Now it would be easy to think that means 'be more religious'. Pray more, come to church more, give more, help out more. But really, that's often just another kind of anxiety – another kind of persuading God and yourself that actually you really matter. It wouldn't really be making *God* central to your life; it would be making your religious performance central. How do you make *God* central?

Well, the Christian faith is that there is one life which got this right. One life which was truly fixed on God, and thus in which there was no anxiety at all – the life of Jesus Christ. Now, Jesus knew tremendous danger and suffering. God did not keep him safe, far from it. But his heart was so knitted to God that that didn't matter: the love and trust between them went deeper than any mere circumstance, however terrible.

And the only peace for us, the only true freedom from anxiety, is our lives to be knitted into that life, and so knitted into God. It's not a matter of trying to copy Jesus, though there are worse ideas. It's more mysterious than that. It's letting Jesus be in us. It's saying to Him, live your life through me. Catch me up in your relationship to your Father. Let me be included in what's between you and Him. If you think about it, that is the deepest meaning of every communion service: that he might live in us, and that we might live in him. When you receive the bread and the wine, it's as if – not as if, it is – you're becoming one with Jesus in his love for the Father. And everything else about being a Christian is really a matter of letting that one-ness come up from the roots and work its way through everything about us. And insofar as that happens, the anxiety fades away. Perfect love casts out fear, and the joy comes back: the joy of the birds, the joy of the lilies, the joy of a child of God, set free from death and giving glory to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.