

A short sermon from Matthew 6 : 24 - 34

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the first and love the second, or he will be devoted to the first and despise the second. You cannot serve God and Money.

“This is why I tell you not to be anxious about food and drink to keep you alive and about clothes to cover your body. Surely life is more than food, the body more than clothes. Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow and reap and store in barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth more than the birds? Can anxious thought add a single day to your life?

And why be anxious about clothes? Consider how the lilies grow in the fields; they do not work, they do not spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his splendour was not attired like one of them. If that is how God clothes the grass in the fields, which is there today and tomorrow is thrown on the stove, will he not all the more clothe you? How little faith you have!

Do not ask anxiously, “What are we to eat? What are we to drink? What shall we wear?” These are the things that occupy the minds of the heathen, but your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.

Set your mind on God’s kingdom and his justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well.

So do not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after itself. Each day has troubles enough of its own.

At first sight this reads like a sentimental “Don’t worry : God’s going to give you everything you need” That’s nice! BUT :

Don’t worry where the next meal is coming from? Don’t ‘store in barns’ (save up for your retirement)? So : it’s OK to sponge on the state? The world owes you a living?

It’s actually dangerously ‘back to nature’, too . . . who needs clothes, when you’ve got your ‘birthday suit?’ The great king Solomon – the pinnacle of Israel’s glory – isn’t worth so much as a wild flower? Try telling that to a developer who wants to build on a greenfield site! No storing in barns : so – what? – are we supposed to forage for nuts and berries? And doesn’t our government want us all to be investing in pensions?

And, anyway, *does* God provide for his children? Say an earthquake destroys your city and buries your children. Is *that* God ‘knowing what you need’? Floods wash over the delta and leave hundreds of communities of the poorest of the poor devastated. Is *that* God caring for his children?

Jesus’s teaching, as so often, is deliberately shocking, but it’s leading up to a punchline : “Set your mind on God’s kingdom and his justice before everything else, *and all the rest will come to you as well.*”

It’s not that you don’t need food, clothing, housing. Of course we do. It’s not that there isn’t trouble in this life (the reading itself ends : ‘each day has enough troubles of its own’). But they are not the main purpose of living, and they shouldn’t distract us from what we’re really here for. Humans (says Jesus – and this is provocative, too) are worth more than birds, whose whole lives are dedicated to gathering food, having babies and building nests. For humans, that’s just the basics. Our purpose on this planet is about far more.

So what *is* the main purpose of living, according to this?

The main purpose of living is to know God and to honour God in our living. Not attract attention to ourselves – how clever we are, how famous we are, how much we can achieve. It is God we are called to honour, to draw attention to, not ourselves.

And what, according to this reading, does ‘honouring God’ mean? Does it mean being very religious? Not necessarily. Matthew, writing elsewhere, isn’t very impressed with religious enthusiasm that says ‘Yes! Yes, Lord’ but doesn’t actually deliver anything that God wants. And what God wants is *justice*. Honouring God means working to meet God’s demands for justice above everything else.

So for example : Justice demands that you don’t build cheap school buildings in earthquake zones with massive concrete floors propped on pillars that pancake flat when the building is shaken sideways :

as happened in Kashmir in 2005 and again this month in Southern China. *Earthquakes* don't kill people. *Buildings* do. Don't blame God for human lack of thought and care. If the builders had had a thought for the users of the building rather than building cheap, there wouldn't have been the deaths.

Justice demands that you don't herd the poorest people on to the land that no one else wants : the delta floodplains of Bangladesh or Burma, or the deserts of the Darfur region of Southern Sudan. Or, for that matter, don't cram as many houses as you can on to the floodplains of the Thames Estuary, simply because the land's cheap and you can get rich selling them to people desperate for a house of their own. At least, don't do that and then blame God when people's houses are ruined by flood and they can't insure them.

Jesus criticises those who 'store in barns', yes; but storing in barns, in Jesus's world, was about the rich hoarding *at the expense of the poor* – putting themselves first, letting the weak go to the wall. Failing to realise that true security lies on communities working together and caring for each other, especially the poor.

Put God's justice first, and the rest will sort itself out – that's Jesus's teaching here. This beautiful planet is perfectly capable of sustaining all human life without the need for any child to die of hunger and preventable disease. If you ignore everybody else, just look after Number One . . . well, you may get away with it. But don't blame God if you don't.

The reading started with the warning that 'You can't serve both God and Money'. (There are more references to money than there are to salvation in the Gospels.) I've just written a Gift Day Appeal letter to members and friends which ended with the claim that giving money away is one sure-fire way of being sure that Money is not running our life – knowing that it's a servant of God, not our master. I dared to say that many Christians could affirm that they never got poorer for giving money away. Of course, one way of making sure that Money is our *master* and *not* our servant is to get into debt. Which is one reason why the Christian church has been a key supporter of credit unions – community-owned savings banks that basically enable people to support each other through the peaks and troughs.

What I'm saying is that this reading, which sounds rather romantic – "Ah! how nice the birds and flowers are, and how well God looks after them" – is actually a provocative and hard-edged challenge to focus our priorities on something outside ourselves. Put all your energy into honouring God, whatever the cost, and as if by magic you'll find that food, clothing, housing whatever will be provided – enough for what you need, on a day-by-day basis. (The Lord's Prayer, which comes in Matthew's gospel just before this reading, recommends that we pray, not for cupboards full of grub but 'give us this day our daily bread' – in other words, enough to see us through today.)

Thousands of Christians have lived by faith like this and can testify that it's true. God *doesn't* help those who help themselves (as the old saying goes). Day by day, God provides for those who commit their lives to justice for others. For a year or two, I lived like this myself and can testify that it's true. Most of us, locked down with rent and debt and mortgage repayments, so busy with our own concerns with little thought for the demands for justice for others, either ignore this gospel challenge or just feel vaguely queasy about it.

Well, there's no easy answer to that one. But just because the challenge to gospel living is a tough one which it's impossible to fully live out as we are at the moment doesn't mean it isn't *true*, and doesn't mean it isn't good news.

So there's the challenge (and the encouragement) – put others' concerns first (especially the weak and vulnerable), and though you may live without worldly security, you will never go hungry, naked or homeless.

Dick Wolff