

Strive First

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon William E. Scrivener at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, May 25, 2008.

“But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness.”

Today we begin, in the cycle of the Church Year, what is often referred to as Ordinary Time. Ordinary Time – that time that comes between Trinity Sunday and the First Sunday of Advent. As Dean Diamond described it last week, it stretches forth from here like a great green expanse. For the past six months we have heard the story of God’s mighty works played out against a liturgical backdrop which has provided us with a focused structure to see God at work in creation, in the story of Jesus and in the sending of the Holy Spirit. Now we enter a time in which we continue to hear and read about God’s creative, redemptive and sustaining work in the more normal course of events. Ordinary time.

So it is perhaps worth considering what it means to be a Christian in Ordinary Time. For, in a larger sense, that is the time we are actually living in. This is the time between the Resurrection and Ascension, and the time that is to come.

It may be especially worthwhile to consider what it means to be part of the Body as we take a look at events which don’t feel too ordinary to me, at least, and perhaps not to you either. Let’s start with the twin catastrophes which have befallen Myanmar and China: a cyclone so devastating that as many as 100,000 people may have lost their lives; an earthquake so powerful that it has cost not only tens of thousands of lives but also threatens to unleash secondary disasters upon the populace, especially if dams start giving way. It’s not that these events are unprecedented. But the extent of the devastation, and the fact that they occurred so close together, makes them seem far from ordinary. It is an almost overwhelming chain of events.

On another level all together, I’m also pretty confident that there are at least a few of you out there who are saying to yourself, “This isn’t an ordinary time for me, either.” There are those, I know, who are facing serious health issues, or the loss of loved ones, or the loss of security. All of which is to say that, whatever the season, we always face the prospect of being caught up in difficult, painful, unsettling situations which can threaten to undo us.

So how are we to be, in this Season of Ordinary Time? What does our walk of faith look like?

Well, at first glance, I’m not sure Jesus’ words from today will be all that helpful. The portion of Matthew’s Gospel we heard this morning is the latter part of the Sermon on the Mount. Now I know we tend to associate the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes, those wonderfully comforting words that proclaim the blessed state of the poor, the meek, the peacemakers. But the sermon is really much more than that. It is a sermon about the kingdom Jesus has come to proclaim, and offers a host of teachings which continually

turn the existing order on its head. In effect he says, “The Kingdom of God is not like any earthly kingdom and much of what you have been taught about what is valuable to God is wrong!”

The section we heard today might be entitled the “Don’t Worry” section. “Do not worry about your life.” “And why do you worry about clothing?” “Do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'" “Do not worry about tomorrow.”

What is he talking about? To begin with, I can tell you that usually the least helpful thing we can say to someone who is worrying about something is “Don’t worry about it.” It’s right up there with “I’m sure everything will be OK.” Unless I have the power to guarantee a good outcome, it is both insensitive and presumptuous of me to tell someone else not to worry. It manifests not care for the other but a desire that we ourselves not be troubled by what they are experiencing. And I certainly cannot imagine proclaiming this message to someone in Myanmar or China – someone who has lost everything and for whom help in any form may come too late to make a difference.

What would seem to make this section even more curious is that Jesus is preaching, for the most part, to the poor, the disenfranchised, the “least of these”. For these folks, the beatitudes would have been good news indeed, because it told them that, in God’s Kingdom, those in their condition would be the most welcome – not those who were rich or who held positions of power, or who flaunted their piety. But how would they have heard the admonition “Don’t worry”? After all, the very things Jesus seems to be telling them not to worry about are the very things on which the slender thread of their lives often hung – will there be enough to eat? Will I have enough clothing to keep warm when the weather turns cold? How can I not worry about tomorrow when it may be bleaker than today?

But we need to be particularly careful, as we ponder this message, because the Church has been rightly accused, down through the years, of offering spiritual bromides to the poor and oppressed rather than confronting the sources of that poverty and oppression – that is to say, the principalities and powers which hold and manipulate wealth and wield power to satisfy their own needs. You don’t have to be a Leninist to understand that the message of the Gospel has often been used as a tool to maintain the status quo rather than challenge it. So we need to be careful not to hear Jesus’ words as a command to the poor to accept their lot, and passively wait for their wants to be provided for or for the ultimate reward in heaven.

So let’s start by remembering, as I often tell you, that when Jesus proclaims the Kingdom he is not so much laying down a set of rules as he is telling us what the Kingdom is about, and how it differs from earthly kingdoms. The Kingdom of God is that place or condition where the poor and meek are blessed, where the last shall be first, where forgiveness abounds. It is that place or condition where we are in community with each other and mutually responsible for each other.

So I don't hear Jesus saying "Don't worry; be happy." Rather I hear him challenging his listeners and us to dare to live differently, to dare to live hopefully, and to dare, in Gandhi's words, to be the change they want to see in the world.

The core of that challenge is contained in these words: "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Again, do not hear these words as promising material goodies if you behave. Jesus is first of all challenging us to do something difficult but very important – strive for the kingdom of God. Not "seek" as some translations and the hymn have it, but "strive". It's work, it's a commitment, an investment in something that is of ultimate value.

Beyond that, we are challenged to strive for God's Kingdom and God's righteousness. Dr. Robert Linthicum, in a commentary on Matthew, writes, "What Jesus is saying in this passage is that we are to take our eyes off of a constant concern for our own material well-being so that our attention can be focused on the worship of God and therefore the service of all those who are hurting, impoverished or marginalized."

In other words, Jesus is saying, not that our basic material needs are unimportant, but that we need put our concerns in their proper place. I sometimes think that a better, more contemporary word for "worry" in this context would be "obsess about". Do not obsess about what you're going to wear; don't obsess about whether you've got enough; don't obsess about tomorrow. When we obsess about something we think about it to the exclusion of all else. It becomes the center of our universe, and keeps us from being aware of anything else.

But if we can begin to let go of all that, then we have more energy to pay attention to God and what God wants. And what does God want? First and foremost to be at the center of our lives. And to what end? So that, in Dr. Linthicum's words, we can be at "...the service of all those who are hurting, impoverished or marginalized." We are challenged to let go of our worries about our own needs so that we can give proper attention to the needs of others. If we, as a community, as the Body of Christ, can do that then, as Jesus tells us, all the other things will be given to us. They will come to us, not as a reward for our good behavior, but as a consequence being for each other the people God calls us to be. So whether it's dipping into our material resources to send aid to Myanmar and China through the Episcopal Relief and Development fund, or whether it's volunteering at the 5,000 Club, we set aside some of our own self-concern so that others may be helped, so that perhaps they need to worry less.

But now that I've unpacked all of this, and now that you understand full well that Jesus is not telling us not to worry so much as to be faithful to God's call and not lose sight of the needs of others, you may still be left with a kind of "so what" feeling. "I get it." you say (if only to yourself). "But worry is a real part of life. There are legitimate reasons for being worried that have nothing to do with not caring for others, or even with being of little faith." To which I say "Amen." It is part of the human condition, both that we will have real things to worry about and that we will worry, that we will be anxious. We are not promised a life free from care, we are only promised that we will not be left

comfortless. I'm reminded here of the perhaps Apocryphal exchange between a child and the Sunday School teacher. The teacher admonishes the child, "We are put on earth to help others." To which the child appropriately responds, "Then what are others put here for?"

Indeed, what are they here for? They are here, to help bear our burdens, just as we are there to help bear theirs. Whether it is friends listening as you voice your worry about a health issue, or LAMS preparing meals while your loved one is incapacitated, whether it is an AA sponsor taking a late night call from someone in danger of drinking again, or someone coming through with financial assistance when things look bleak, each of us is putting our own needs aside for the moment in order to be a sign of God's love to someone else. This is striving after the Kingdom of God; this is striving after God's righteousness. It is our calling in both ordinary and extraordinary times.

AMEN