

2nd Sunday before Lent Bishop Bowlby's Sermon

27th February 2011-03-18

St Chad's 10am

Mt. 6: 31-33. Jesus said, "Therefore do not worry, saying "What will we eat?", or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed, your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Two weeks ago, someone came up to me after this service and said of the day's Gospel reading, "Are we really supposed to believe that? What on earth does it mean?" The passage in question included phrases like, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away", and is part of the Sermon on the Mount, as is today's Gospel. I was reminded of a little paperback, based on a series of newspaper articles called, "But that I can't believe", written by Bishop John Robinson after *Honest to God*.

The short answer to my enquirer's question was, "No, you don't have to believe every word of the Bible literally, not even the words attributed to Jesus." He often used humour and exaggeration, in order to make his point more strongly. Telling people that it will be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God is another familiar example.

And so, by the same token, today's Gospel is not advocating recklessness or anarchism. How could Jesus possibly have suggested that a rural community, based on farming, shall not think about gathering seed, ploughing, sowing and so on in preparation for next year's harvest? True, lilies and grasses grow well in some places without human preparation and so do snowdrops as in the wonderful display at Attingham, but what that emphasises is that growth does not depend entirely on us. As Paul once said of his ministry, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." (1 Cor.3:6) And later, "What do you have that you did not receive?"

The key word in all this is "worry", one which has been variously translated in our English Bibles. Since we are celebrating the King James Bible this month, we must note that they looked at the Aramaic word behind it and came up with "take no thought for". The Revisers in the nineteenth century rightly thought that was a bit of a distortion, and substituted "be not anxious for". The Revised Standard Version, much used nowadays, changed it again to the word "worry", as we have it in this order of service.

The heart of today's reading, then, is the call by Jesus to his hearers, and so to us, not to worry, because **worry is the opposite of trust**. We are to trust God in every situation. That comes first.

It was said of Neville Gordon, once the Bishop of Coventry (1943 – 1958) that preaching was not his metier, though he had many other strengths. His mind was filled with so many visionary ideas and his head with such burning passion that ordered language could not express coherently what he desired to share with others.....after a sermon in Eton College chapel, when his struggle with words ended in apparent failure, he stood in the chancel as

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the organist was playing over the final hymn, and shouted out, "What I really meant to say was – you damned well all need to be converted." (Trevor Beeson, Round the Church in 50 years, p 17). I bet some of the boys remembered that!

Conversion leads to trust which sets us free to care about others. People experience that in a good marriage, or as soldiers, for instance. But trust in **God** also sets us free to care about His world. It is not an accident that Jesus moved at once from "not worrying" to striving first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. John Taylor, a former African missionary who later became head of the CMS and then Bishop of Winchester, famously remarked, "Live simply, so that others may simply live."

At the heart of trusting is prayer, prayer as opening the heart and mind to the fact that this is God's world, despite much that sometimes seems to deny this. Our first reading today was a long one, I know, and again is not to be taken as literal history or science. But in a wonderful way it affirms that because this is God's world it is a good world, not a hostile world; human kindness is called to care for it, and to share the gifts that God gives in it. Jesus constantly underlines this. It is a terrible fact that even in today's overcrowded planet, there would be enough to go round for everyone if we stopped hoarding, wasting, fighting and grabbing and could discipline ourselves enough to share.

This week sees the start of Fair Trade Fortnight. In a way that is also what today's Gospel is about; spending less time worrying about our own needs, giving more thought to those of so many around the world who are constantly exploited and have barely enough to live on. This wonderful and incredible planet belongs to them as well as to us; let us never forget that, and let us stop making a mockery of God's generosity, as He reaches out to us and calls us to share this mission to a world in so much need.