

2 before Lent

Gen 1: 1 – 2: 3 'Creation' and Matt 6: 25-34 'Do not worry'

Let's see who has been paying attention to the familiar creation narrative from Genesis. What is the refrain, the phrase that comes back six times? It is 'and God saw that it was good – indeed, it was very good.'

I wonder how many of us nowadays look around us and consider creation to be 'very good'. There are so many problems within creation that it would be difficult to know even where to begin if we were to mention them all. We see thirst, hunger, areas where nothing will grow, areas where the growth has been flooded with so much water that the harvest is ruined, areas where food is so abundant that much of it gets thrown away and people die from illnesses related to obesity, and areas where there is no food at all and people die from hunger. There are areas of war where people live in fear for their lives day in day out, there are areas where people of different faiths refuse to even speak to each other, there are people within the same faith or denomination who would rather leave church than work with those who think differently about issues regarding to headship, sexuality and salvation. There are leaders who do not act in the best interest of the people they lead, and leaders who go even further than that and abuse their power.

In the light of this, part of Jesus' speech in the Gospel of Matthew may seem crass. 'Do not worry,' he says, 'Do not worry about tomorrow, ye of little faith.' This section is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which covers chapters 5, 6 and 7, and it may help to consider the context in which Jesus said these words.

The Sermon on the Mount is a lengthy discourse with ethical teachings, ranging from the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer to insights and 'correct behaviour' with regards to anger, oaths, almsgiving, fasting, judging others, and many other issues. The Sermon on the Mount starts by recounting blessings, then moves on to the teaching, then to warnings at the end. The 'do not worry' part is in the middle of the teaching section. Some scholars say that it is a bit of respite in the middle of rather fear-inducing, thought-provoking teachings. Jesus is saying that following him is not easy. The teachings are not easy or comfortable. But, the 'do not worry' section seems to say, those who follow the commandments and the teachings have a Father in heaven who gives good gifts. Do we see the good gifts? Perhaps sometimes we lose sight of them, wrapped up as we are in the day-to-day grind of life. What will we eat? What shall we wear? What shall we do? What decision to make? It doesn't really matter how rich or how poor we are, whether we have a roof over our head or not, whether we have a job or not, many of us spend some proportion of our waking hours worrying about whatever it is that our day-to-day lives throw at us. Our concerns are not so different from those of Jesus' disciples and followers. Worrying is of course not totally unnecessary – worrying means we are concerned about things that could go wrong, or things that are not right, and this may galvanise us into action or make us consider a back-up plan which means we are prepared.

Yet, here is Jesus saying 'do not worry'. In the middle of his Sermon on the Mount, in between a set of instructions and a set of warnings. Perhaps there is something very symbolic about the fact that the 'do not worry' section sits right in the middle of this. In the midst of life, in the midst of instructions and rules and laws and warnings and other concerns, there is this place of rest, of goodness. A moment of quiet and breathing, a moment of stopping our thoughts and concerns to focus on the gifts around us, a moment of re-connecting with God and His world.

A number of people I know are keeping a 'gratitude journal'. At the end of each day, you sit down and write down between 3 and 5 things you are thankful for. Some research shows this has a positive effect on our happiness, as well as other benefits on our physical and mental well-being. Doing this provides a few moments of quiet and reflection, a searching for the gifts of the day. It doesn't matter how large or small these gifts are; it can range from listening to a piece of music that makes us feel good to someone smiling at us unexpectedly to really enjoying a 5 minute break in the sunshine hearing the sounds of the birds. A 'gratitude journal' is just one of many ways in which we can stop briefly and actively seek out what has been good in our day. I wonder what other ways we can think of?

I'd like to finish by reading this famous poem by William Henry Davies:

Leisure

WHAT is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare?—

No time to stand beneath the boughs,
And stare as long as sheep and cows:

No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass:

No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night:

No time to turn at Beauty's glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance:

No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began?

A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.

Let's challenge ourselves this week to do what Jesus said: look at the birds of the air, consider the lilies of the field, do not add tomorrow's worries to today's. Let's stand and stare, even if only for a moment, and remind ourselves of the goodness and gifts of God.

Amen.

