

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Second Sunday before Lent

readings: [Genesis 1.1-2.3](#), [Romans 8.18-25](#), [Matthew 6.25-end](#)

12 February 2023

It is often said that one of the perks of being a Church of England priest in stipendiary ministry is that a house comes with the job. In truth, it's something of a mixed blessing. It's certainly the case that Alison and I have lived in larger houses than we would have done otherwise (although Alison has said she only married me so she could live in a classy period property, and I have to say I have singularly failed in that respect). And it's certainly advantageous when you have to fetch a contractor in to effect a repair and someone else pays the bill. On the other hand, many of our professional friends, having arrived at the same stage in life that we have, live in their own properties, have improved them over the years so they have them just the way they want them and have already paid the mortgage off.

Quite a few clergy who have lived in vicarages over the years, even with help from the Church Commissioners, are faced with the challenge of where they are going to live when they retire. Now, this is not a fob story and I am not looking for sympathy, but simply to point out that Alison and I, from the start of our married life, have always maintained a foothold in the housing market in order to ensure that we retain control over where we are going to live when I retire. We have been fortunate enough to be able to do that and we think that's been sensible forward planning.

So, when our gospel reading this morning says things like,

'Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or your body, what you will wear.'

what are we to make of it?

One commentary I have read this week says the worst thing you can say to a person who is panicking is 'Don't panic'. Shade of Corporal Jones. But seriously, for those for whom the current cost of living crisis is not just an inconvenience to the bank balance, but a real source of worry and anxiety about how you are going to survive - choices about 'eating or heating' which we have heard so much about over this winter - there is a danger that this morning's gospel on the face of it looks like an incredibly offensive 'ostrich' 'head in the sand' approach to faith.

Do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?"

So, this is not, 'if you pray hard enough or you have enough faith, God will provide', which is, indeed, offensive to those in real need - those challenged by the cost of living crisis, but more acutely, those struggling to maintain a day to day existence in war torn Ukraine, or those survivors who have been rendered homeless in freezing conditions in Southern Turkey and Northern Syria.

A couple more sentences:

If God clothes the grass of the field... will he not much more clothe you - you of little faith?

Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Let's go back to the story of creation in our first reading.

I once heard it said that, if you imagine the height of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square representing the timespan of whole history of the earth's existence, the time that humanity has populated the earth is the equivalent of the thickness of a postage stamp stuck to the top of Nelson's head. I am not sure if that is true, but it sounds as if it should be.

In terms of the creation story in Genesis 1, humanity doesn't arrive on the scene until day 6 of 7. Quite late on the scene. By then we already have a picture of creation, in which oceans and mountains, plants and animals are all seen by God as good, loved by God even, before ever human beings arrive on the scene.

There is a story about former American president Franklin D. Roosevelt and one of his close advisers who talked late into the evening one night at the White House. At last, the president suggested they go out to the rose garden and look at the stars before bed. They went out and looked up at the stars in silence for several minutes. Then Roosevelt said, 'All right, I think we feel small enough now to go in and go to sleep'.

We need that sense of perspective. It is part of what it means to be human. Human beings can easily forget how small a part we are in the history of the earth, let alone how infinitesimally small we are within the universe. The sheer mystery of human life itself.

Infinitesimally small. And yet each one of us uniquely made and individually known and loved by God. That is the paradox at the heart of the gospel. The God who clothes the lilies and feeds the birds finds us to be precious because we are his children made in his image.

Unlike previous eras, we can no longer be content with seeing creation as a harmonious and ordered whole with humanity at the centre. And yet, despite everything we now know scientifically, and whatever the ultimate place of humanity is within the vastness of the universe and its evolution, so often as a species we tend to set ourselves over and against creation instead of appreciating and wondering at our place within it. In our human arrogance and determination to be master of our own planet we think of ourselves as the centre of the universe and controllers of our own destiny. That's true of us as a species and it's true of us individually. We like to feel in control. Independence is good. Dependence is something to be avoided.

Whatever the creation story in Genesis means about humanity 'having dominion' over every living thing, it surely isn't about manipulative domination, usurping the place of God in whose image we are made.

'Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or your body, what you will wear.'

Not a rebuke to those who do worry about the cost of living crisis. Or even a criticism of me or any of us for making financial provision for ourselves and our loved ones in the future. This is the society we have to live in and we have to live in and relate to the real world. But it is ultimately a reminder of our dependence on God for everything we have. And as we approach the season of Lent and the story of the temptations in the wilderness, we are called to reorientate our lives with God at the centre.

Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

We do not need to pretend that we have no anxieties or to expect that God will provide if we just leave him to it. We are called to live our lives appreciative of our place within creation, miniscule but uniquely known and loved recognising that is God our creator and sustainer who is the source and ground of our being. That doesn't necessarily come easily or naturally. The daily discipline of putting God first is something we need to work at and the coming season of Lent is the perfectly place to take a fresh look at where we may have allowed ourselves to drift away from that focus and to try to do something to commit ourselves afresh.

**The Revd Richard Andrews,
Canon Precentor**