

8th Sunday Year A 2017

(Sunday before Lent)

Fr Peter Groves

Matthew 6.24-34

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life...

Matthew 6.25

What have the Romans ever done for us? In the movie *Life of Brian*, the answer was quite a lot. And if the Romans had not been after Brian, he would never have fallen off a balcony on to the head of a preacher, and we would have been deprived of some truly great scriptural interpretation:

Consider the lilies.

Consider the lilies?

BRIAN: Uh, well, the birds, then.

EDDIE: What birds?

BRIAN: Any birds

EDDIE: Why?

BRIAN: Well, have they got jobs?

EDDIE: Have the birds got jobs?!... What's the matter with him... He says the birds are scrounging.

BRIAN: Oh, uhh, no, the point is the birds. They do all right. Don't they? and you're much more important than they are, right? So, what are you worrying about?

EDDIE: I'm worrying about what you have got against birds.

BRIAN: I haven't got anything against birds. Consider the lilies.

ARTHUR: He's having a go at the flowers now.

And so it goes on... A couple of years ago, Kings College London hosted a conference exploring the connections between the Pythons' efforts and the world of New Testament scholarship. One sobering comment was that it would be impossible today to make the same film, since the general knowledge of scripture on which it relies simply no longer exists. One can't expect people to laugh at the words "Blessed are the cheesemakers", if they have never heard the original Biblical quote. And while that's all very well, isn't it typical of the Church of England to think about something as wonderfully happy as Life of Brian, and worry about it. We

are so determined to be hard on ourselves, and the world around us. Somehow we think, if it doesn't raise concerns, we are not thinking seriously enough. Joy, it seems, doesn't really count as serious.

Do not be anxious, Jesus says. Do not worry. About your life, about what you will eat, about you will wear. Do not worry. I wonder if any other of Jesus' utterances is, today, more counter-cultural. Anxiety and worry somehow define us, act as a sort of self-justification. If I have something to worry about, I must be working hard, must be doing well, must be important. Look at all I have to worry about, isn't it a marvel how I manage? But Jesus says, Do not worry: the Gentiles strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom.

Of course it's very easy for those who have to tell those who have not that they shouldn't be concerned for financial means. And of course for a few people, wealth and poverty are equally worrying, that is to say, those who have plenty of money are easily consumed by the desire for more, so that there's no

satisfaction because no money will ever be enough. Jesus' concern in the Sermon on the Mount is not to say that wealth is a bad thing in itself, or that need is not significant, but rather that none of what we think is important is actually important, when our attention should be focused upon the Kingdom of God. Material concerns should simply have no place in our inventory of wishes.

Jesus' instructions not to worry are not so much a test not of our fortitude, our courage where others are anxious, but of our trust, an examination of the relationship into which we are drawn by Christ. Jesus the examples of nature and thereby draws attention to the central Biblical contention that the God of Israel is the creator, the one on whom everything depends for every moment of its existence. The point about the lilies of the field or the birds of the air is not, fundamentally, that they are beautiful: the point is that they are created. Jesus is reminding us that all life, however great the value we place upon it, is always and only the gift of God. Indeed, Jesus' words cock a snook at the grandeur and splendour of King Solomon: he who was given the gift of wisdom, and displayed that wisdom to the world both well and not so well – by judging in fairness, equity and insight, but also by building up

and showing off all the material treasures he could get his hands on. And yet the lilies of the field put him to shame.

Jesus challenges us to remember our creator. What might it mean not to be anxious? What might not worrying actually look like? Something like what Christians call faith, faith in the God who made all things, faith in the God who sustains all things, who at every moment of our existence is loving us and everything into being. This is the faith we all have in some small part, and this is the faith that we would like to have in much greater part. Lent, the season which we begin this week with Ash Wednesday, is a journey in which that faith is focussed more fully on Jesus and hence can grow through the love of God in Christ. It is worth remembering that faith, in the Christian tradition, is never left on its own. In the language of Aquinas, it is formed, formed by the love of God. If we want to know what it's like not to be anxious, we should ask ourselves this: Do we know what it is like to love? Do we know what it's like to give ourselves to others, to let generosity, self-giving, become our default setting? This is a high calling, not something to which we will instantly adapt.

But God gives us the church and its seasons precisely because we cannot do things on our own.

In the coming days and weeks, many people will join a priest in the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation, that is, they will make their confession. In so doing, they recognising that a life focused entirely on self is a life which cannot but be anxious, which cannot see beyond the cares and the burdens which dominate our own tiny corner of the world. Laying before God our sins and our weaknesses is admitting, confessing, the truth that we cannot do this human business on our own. To try is to fail, and to try without help is to fail without hope. Lent moves us towards the passion of Christ, towards that climactic moment when every aspect of our lives is borne by another, offered perfectly to the father in the endless act of self-giving which is the sacrifice of Christ. To come to the confessional is to kneel in the presence of the saviour and allow him to remove, one by one, those things which weigh us down, those cares and anxieties and faults and failings, and to watch him nail them one by one to the cross of our salvation, so that we may rise with him to the joy of God's reconciling love.

Placing ourselves within the narrative of the passion of Christ is an act of faith. Not a blind confidence that there is never any cause for concern, but an acknowledgement that our anxieties are too closely linked with our pride, and that the God who made us and sustains us with his love, gives himself for us on that cross and from that tomb. Do not be anxious, Jesus says. Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness. Seek the kingdom, seek to follow Christ, and rejoice in the love and forgiveness which are the stuff of Christian life.