

Eighth Sunday after Epiphany: 26 February 2017

*Jesus said, "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6.33).*

Seek ye first the kingdom of God. These words are so familiar, there's probably a tune stuck in everyone's head by now, just from having heard them spoken. They are so familiar and comforting that they are almost enough to drown out the noise of our objections to the unrealistic picture being painted for us in this passage. But let's give our objections a bit of space, shall we?

It all sounds very pious and trusting to say that we shouldn't worry about food, water or clothing, but allow God to take care of us. But we all know that money doesn't grow on trees, and neither does most of the food we eat. The lilies' clothing grows along with the lily, but human clothing takes work to produce – and available resources. For most of us, that means money, which means employment, savings or stable government assistance, none of which comes automatically. And a reference letter from God Almighty won't guarantee a job in most sectors. So how, exactly, does our heavenly Father propose to get such necessities to us if we don't put the work in ourselves?

And as most of us know by now, even a good deal of hard work on our part can often fall short of achieving what we need. If this is relatively rare in our own society, it is still all too common on the global scale. Indeed, there is right now an ongoing famine in South Sudan. Millions of people are facing starvation and many are dying, not for lack of hard work, but as victims of drought and armed conflict.

And we dare not attribute these kinds of tragedies to a lack of faith on their part. Christ has already made clear that these poor, mourning, meek and hungry ones are blessed of God. Christ is with them in their suffering. But are these words of his really for them too? "Do not worry," "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." Are these words for them? Or only for us who are comfortable, who have the luxury of robust social safety nets and who can access a food bank or a community's generosity if we're hard up? In this light, that familiar song feels a bit harder to sing with confidence. Do we sing it only for us who are safe? Or do we dare sing it for those in danger too?

But these words are for them, just as they were for those poor, beleaguered crowds that followed Christ around on earth. They must be for them if they are for anyone at all. "Strive first for the kingdom of God." Indeed, what else could they strive for? There is no food to be had, no clothing to be bought. Remaining alive is a constant struggle, but for those devastated crowds, it couldn't be any clearer that no amount of worry

“can add a single hour to your span of life.” Worry will do nothing to help. Only food, water and clothing will make another hour of life possible.

And the ray of light in such terrible darkness is that there are indeed several aid agencies working in the area to try to bring relief. Just as, wherever people are in need, we find God's people at work to help.

But even before the aid arrives, even if it never arrives, these poor, starving people are more than helpless victims. They are children of God to whom Christ's words are addressed: “strive first for the kingdom of God.” Look for signs of God's kingdom in your midst, because it is there. Listen for God speaking to you in your distress, because God in Christ speaks his blessing to you even as he suffers with you. Love and care for those others who suffer around you, because that love carries God's kingdom with it. Strive first for the kingdom of God because that is what will make life worth living for whatever hours, days or years are left in it.

And this is true for us no less than for those others. Striving for God's kingdom will not put food on the table, but unless we strive for that kingdom, all the food in the world can only deceive us. All our comfort and security brings only the illusion of a happy life. Indeed, as many have discovered, an abundance of resources often brings more worries with it rather than less. This, after all, is what the modern advertising industry counts on. Once we have some money to spend, it's easy to convince us that there is something we absolutely need to get with that money. There is something to fear – like a home-invasion – there is something to be nervous about – like what others will think about our second-hand clothes or our run-down car – there is something to feel insecure about – like our retirement prospects. And then again, there is always a product for that, always something we can get to deal with our worries. Except the irony is that these things inevitably feed our worry, feed our uneasy sense that there is something more we still need before we can feel completely secure.

But when Christ says to us, “strive first for the kingdom of God,” he cuts through this cycle of worry and false fulfilment. God's kingdom is not one more thing we can get to deal with our worries – not “fire insurance,” as it's sometimes been described. Because to strive first for God's kingdom is, first of all, to stop striving. Stop striving for more stuff to give us a false sense of security. Stop striving for the approval of our peers. Stop striving for justification before God. Stop striving to secure our churches' place in society.

All these things are, by nature, uncertain. What is certain is that God cares for us, that Christ loves us so much that he entered into our own precarious existence and suffered as we do – and even more. What is certain is that love for God and love for

neighbour will never feed our anxieties, but will overcome them, will free us to live the life that truly is life and will reveal that this love can weather every loss, every insecurity and every death. Just as death was not the last word for Christ, neither does any of our fears or anxieties get the last word. Strive first for the kingdom of God, because the kingdom of God will be there from first to last, when nothing else is.

Amen.