

The God Who Speaks

8: Abundance

Opening Prayer and Welcome

God our loving Father,
You made us your children in baptism.
Pour out on us the gifts of your Holy Spirit.
Help us as a parish to know the paths we must follow
so as to build up your kingdom.
Teach us to grow in faith,
to encourage one another with words of hope,
and to care for your family with love.
Let us bear witness to the Good News,
and be faithful followers of your Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ
who lives and reigns with you
and the Holy Spirit
for ever and ever.
Amen

Introduction to the Theme

Many people living in the wealthier world suffer from a hidden and debilitating sickness. We speak about it far less than we should, and we hope that - somehow - by ignoring it, it will go away. We talk about its symptoms, but rarely about the sickness itself - hoping that if we manage the symptoms then the sickness will not overcome us completely.

It is even more disturbing to realise that our wealthier world actually *relies* on our sickness: that, without it, our world would - in a very real way - simply collapse.

The sickness is *anxiety* and its symptom is *worry*.

It isn't a modern sickness, but - surrounded by so much goodness - we seem to be stricken with it all the more acutely: we worry about our health; about our mortgages; about having a job; about being safe from attack; about global disasters; and about our children. If there's something we could worry about, then we will worry about it.

And yet Jesus is very clear and very simple in what he says in our first reading today:

Scripture Reading

Matthew 6:25-33 (JB)

I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and how you are to clothe it. Surely life means more than food, and the body more than clothing! Looks at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they are? Can any of you, for all your worrying, add one single arm's length to the span of your life? And why worry about clothing? Think of the flowers growing in the fields; they never have to work or spin; yet I assure you that

not even Solomon in all his fine clothes was dressed like one of these. Now if that is how God clothes the grass in the field... will he not much more look after you? So do not worry; do not say, 'What are we to eat? What are we to drink? How are we to be clothed? It is those who do not believe who set their hearts on all these things. Your heavenly Father knows you need them all. Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on his righteousness, and all these other things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow: tomorrow will take care of itself.

Discussion

*You may find it helpful to sit with the text in silence for a little while. Then, in a spirit of helping one another, you could share your thoughts and discuss with one another what you notice in this text from the Bible. **Listen to one another** because God also speaks through our sisters and brothers in Christ, and through us.*

You can use the following to help you, or explore other thoughts that come to mind:

What do you worry about? Having a job or enough money coming in? Your family? Or something or someone else? What, do you think, this gospel passage says to you in your current situation?

Why, do you think, does Jesus tell his followers to 'set their hearts on the kingdom first'? 'Righteousness' sounds like a very religious word - and not always in a good way! What do you think Jesus means when he says it?

A quiet reflection

Close your eyes and remain in quiet for a little while. Ask yourself if you can feel God's Presence right now. Or perhaps you can think back to something that happened today, or yesterday, that - on reflection - says to you that God is near, perhaps that God has spoken to you. Or it could be in a memory that comes to mind, where you can say, perhaps, that God was close?

Jesus preached a gospel of abundance, of plenty: yet - often - we think about the lack of things rather than the abundance of things. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised, when the news is always grabbing our attention with headlines about starvation, about the economy, and when advertisements are always trying to get us to think about what we DON'T have rather than what we do.

It isn't easy to step back and get some perspective on reality - and that is what Jesus is encouraging us to do: to look at the big picture. And the truth of the situation can sometimes be difficult to stomach: that, in fact, we live in an abundant world, and where there is a lack - hunger, poverty, disease - it is not because 'there isn't enough' but because some of us have more than enough and are failing to share it with those with real needs. We are not called, as followers of Jesus, to feel guilty: we are called to share what we have.

What is our relationship with *things*? When we think about what we have, *what do we feel?*

Are we at peace?

Do we feel deprived?

Do we feel jealous of what other people have and we feel we don't have?

Saint Paul, as we learned in our last session, was happy to say he could live through good times and through bad without worry. He taught the early Church about not being self-centred - thinking only about themselves - but to think in a *togetherness* way: to live with simplicity, as Saint Francis did; to 'give and not count the cost', as Saint Ignatius of Loyola taught.

Scripture Reading

Acts 2:44-47 (JB)

The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed. They went as a body to the Temple every day but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved.

Discussion

It's tempting for us to say 'That was ok for them, but not for me! Living together? Owning everything in common? Selling their goods and possessions and sharing out the proceeds according to what each one needed? It sounds suspiciously like Communism and we all know what happened to that!'

But this isn't Communism: this is how the earliest Christians wanted to live out the teaching of Jesus.

*You may find it helpful to sit with the text in silence for a little while. Then, in a spirit of helping one another, you could share your thoughts and discuss with one another what you notice in this text from the Bible. **Listen to one another** because God also speaks through our sisters and brothers in Christ, and through us.*

You can use the following to help you, or explore other thoughts that come to mind:

What do you FEEL about this description of the early Church? Listen to what you are feeling. We worry a lot about our shrinking church communities: what does this text say to us? If there is one change that I could make right now to how I live my life, what would it be?

The Church Teaches

'Sometimes we are tempted to find excuses and complain, acting as if we could only be happy if a thousand conditions were met. To some extent this is because our "technological society has succeeded in multiplying occasions of pleasure, yet has found it very difficult to engender joy" [Pope Saint Paul VI, *Gaudete in Domino*, 9 May 1975].

I can say that the most beautiful and natural expressions of joy which I have seen in my life were in poor people who had little to hold on to'.

(Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 7, 24 November 2013)

'A community that cherishes the little details of love, whose members care for one another and create an open and evangelising environment, is a place where the risen Lord is present, sanctifying it in accordance with the Father's plan...

Contrary to the growing consumerist individualism that tends to isolate us in a quest for well-being apart from others, our path to holiness can only make us identify all the more with Jesus' prayer "that all may be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you (John 17:21)".

(Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 145-6, 19 March 2018)

Read these extracts again and sit with them for a short while in silence.

Then feel free to share with one another the thoughts that come to your heart.

Closing Prayer

We thank you, Gracious Father, for this time of reflection.
We ask you to give us a fresh understanding of your Presence in our lives.
Strengthen us, we pray, in our faith
Help us to be present to each moment
So that we may see You and hear Your Voice
Everywhere and in all things and all people.
Give us hearts and minds that seek the face of Jesus,
And help us, through the power of the Holy Spirit,
To be always grateful for your blessings,
For the gracious gift of Your Presence.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ
In the unity of your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Reading suggestions

Pope Francis, *The Infinite Tenderness of God: Meditations on the Gospels*, The Word Among Us Press, 2016. A collection of the Holy Father's homilies and addresses on gospel texts, beginning with the birth of Jesus and ending with the resurrection appearances.

Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* (Christ is Alive), Apostolic Exhortation to Young People, 25 March 2019. In simple yet challenging ways, the Holy Father speaks not just to the young, but to the whole Church, called to rediscover its youthful vigour in the Holy Spirit: '[Christ] is in you, he is with you and he never abandons you. However far you may wander, he is always there, the Risen One. He calls you and he waits for you to return to him and start over again. When you feel you are growing old out of sorrow, resentment or fear, doubt or failure, he will always be there to restore your strength and your hope' (*Christus Vivit*, 2).