

Sermon at St Peter & St Paul on 2nd Sunday before Lent (27.02.11)

Readings: Romans 8.15-25 & Matthew 6. 25-end

‘Living by Trust in God’

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear... But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

How do we live our lives by faith – by trust in God?

I want you to imagine, for a moment, a profoundly life-changing experience that radically alters your perspective on what’s important... an experience that enables you to glimpse where your hidden treasure is to be found. It may be that you meet someone – or a group of people – who are profoundly different in their outlook, perhaps imbued with courage or genuinely un-self-interested love; whose presence strikes a cord with you, helping you glimpse something new about God and what a deeper life with God might look like.

Or perhaps something happens to you – an unlikely chain of events or apparent coincidences – that leads you to encounter God afresh, changing your perception of reality forever. An experience - like falling in love or seeing the beauty of the sunset with fresh eyes – so luminous that it goes beyond words; an experience that can only be described as mysterious, our awareness of ‘presence’ or aliveness, quiet distinct from our usual experience of everyday life.

Such experiences, of course, often come in the midst of uncertainty or anguish, when we are pushed beyond our human limits, and yet in our trials, we discover God afresh, speaking into the heart of our lives.

Let me give you a couple of examples:

Last week, while spending 24 hours at Launde Abbey, I met a priest who told me of his experience of spending time on “death row” in America. No, not as a criminal, but as a priest, moved by God to be there for people waiting to die – people, absolutely at their wits end, many of whom, through the kindness and love of strangers, find Christ and die having made peace with God... How much this man moved me to reconnect with what living by faith, at its most luminous, can mean... And I’m sure we’ve all met people who have inspired us (perhaps in less dramatic ways) by their selfless courage in the midst of human need, helping us glimpse the presence of Christ, bringing light out of darkness.

Here’s another example, taken from the world of fiction – although I believe passionately it could just as well be true to life. I wonder how many of you have heard of or read ‘The Shack’? (by William Paul Young). If you haven’t I strongly recommend it.

It’s about a man, called Mack, who loses his daughter in tragic circumstances and whose inner life becomes almost unbearable. Then, one day, he receives a message inviting him to visit a wooden shack, out in the wilds of a national park, where his daughter was tragically lost. Despite his initial scepticism and fears, Mack decides to go there, and whilst there, something incredible happens... He really does meet with God and spend time with him, face to face, struggling with his experience and learning what life (from God’s perspective) is really all about. Naturally it’s an event which changes Mack forever - in the same way as the first disciples of Jesus were changed forever by their time with Jesus - for Mack’s seeing, his perception too, is shifted and radically opened, to the mysterious grace of God present at every moment of his life.

I won't say much more about 'The Shack', because it will spoil the book, but it provides a remarkable picture of what God is actually like: God's intimate presence and wisdom, his unfathomable love, even in the midst of terrible human tragedy; longing to bring good out of suffering or pain or tragedy, patiently waiting for us, seeking our response, so that his grace and transforming love can flow through us. And it's a picture of God which could not be more different from the stereotype which so many people unconsciously believe in.

But what's all this got to do with the 'Sermon on the Mount'? How does 'The Shack' connect with today's Gospel, with all those teachings about faith and ethics and lifestyle, that we've been hearing about over these last few weeks? How can such experience inform *our* wrestling with the question of what it means to live by faith?

The point is that we only really learn to live by faith (to trust God and follow him) when we open our eyes to the presence of God in our lives... The life of faith, the life that Jesus invites us to follow, is not a list of regulations that are required for membership of an elite spiritual club. But it's all about learning to live from the heart, out of a relationship of trust with God, who enables us to see 'everything' differently – and indeed in a radically more exciting and hopeful and life-enhancing way that we can ever imagine. A life which is grace upon grace upon grace...

For living by faith, which Jesus calls us to, is not ultimately about signing up to ten impossible things before breakfast (as if we didn't already have enough to cope with). But opening our eyes and our hearts to receiving God's love and power, a spring of water welling up to eternal life... For here, as we follow him and live by faith, our eyes mysteriously opened to the transforming grace of God: to discover (beyond our wildest dreams) and beyond our basic physical needs – of food and drink and clothing– what LIFE really is all about.

Therefore I tell you, Jesus says, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear... But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

So when Jesus says these words, he's not saying these things (food and drink and clothing) are not important – he knows that we need them – but "TRUST ME and learn to see things as they really are, and then you'll find out what's important"... God's kingdom and his righteousness, his loving purposes, in every situation, his beauty and vitality and abundance... The luminous joy of existence and creation, here where God is really present, a foretaste of the life which is yet to come.

So do not worry, Jesus assures us, but learn to live by trust, to open your eyes to see as I see, discovering the Spirit which is with you, and which genuinely (as so many have discovered, and I certainly have) guides and protect us, and leads us into truth. 'Do not let your hearts be troubled' as Jesus says elsewhere, 'believe in God, believe also in me, in my Father's house are many mansions' 'do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.'

So in order to trust, Jesus is saying, to overcome our fears and unlock our deepest hopes, we need to allow our 'seeing', our perspective, slowly to be changed. That is why, only 3 verses earlier, Jesus says that "the lamp of the body is the eye", and "if our eye is healthy our whole body will be full of light". Because it's only by changing how we see things, learning to recognise God's presence (like the setting sun), that we learn to take the leap, and walk by faith.

We need to be open to our experiences, prayerfully attentive to the present moment – to God’s still presence, beneath the storms of passion and self-will – opening our eyes to where his treasure truly is ... Living our lives like the house built upon rock, whose solid foundation the storms of life can never defeat. And it’s this kind of discovery which enables Paul to see our human struggles in such a different light, keeping our eyes fixed on what is greater – the cosmic purposes of God. ‘For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God...’ to be ‘set free from its bondage to decay’ to ‘obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God’ whose light never fades.

So it’s all about faith, learning to live by trust in God – to see life as it really is (as Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, “the world charged with the grandeur of God”), full of unimagined possibility, and guided in loving wisdom by a God who journeys with each one of us, the hope of our hearts, meeting our deepest needs. So ‘do not worry’ but ‘strive for God and his righteousness’, living and seeing and praying from the heart, ‘and all these things - and more - will be given to you...’

As Jesus says to Mack, it’s all about “learning to live loved... not an easy concept for humans. You have a hard time sharing anything” he chuckled, “so, yes, what we desire is for you to re-turn to us, and then we come and make our home inside you and then we share. The friendship is real, not merely imagined. We’re meant to experience this life, your life, together, in a dialogue, sharing the journey. You get to share in our wisdom and learn to love with our love, and we get to hear you grumble and gripe and complain!” *Amen*