

Sunday 3rd October

Matthew Chapter 6, verses 25-34
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You may 've seen the Chelsea Flower Show in the news over the last couple of weeks, with its amazing variety of plants and show gardens. There are small gardens, eco gardens, roof gardens and balcony gardens, all taking a great deal of work to prepare and keep looking their best. It may be that some of you have recently visited a flower show, in Chelsea or elsewhere. At the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis, God is depicted planting a garden, and in today's passage, He is shown caring for the lilies of the field.

I'm truly sad to say that my one-month placement in Shirley Parish ends today, but during that time, I've learnt how much the natural world means to so many of you. Some of you work for hours a week to keep the grounds of St. James' church looking beautiful. I've heard about the "Forest Church" services you have both here and at St. John's, where people feel close to God, worshipping where they can see His creation all around. At the St. John's reflective worship service, in their grounds, I was very impressed because, even though there were no church bells before the service, it was preceded with beautiful, loud birdsong!

Now, from the gospel passage, my initial point is the Father's love for us, secondly, don't worry/have faith, and third, seek first the kingdom of God.

The Father's love for us: in the Bible we're told that God is love. At the beginning of Genesis, God is shown pronouncing that everything He's made, including human beings, is "very good". As Christians, we understand that we are imperfect creatures living in a fallen world, but just think, there is something about each one of us that God looks upon with approval, and sees as "very good".

Today's Gospel reading from Matthew Chapter 6, is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is addressed to people who are

already followers of Jesus, and begun to be part of the Kingdom of God. At the opening of the Sermon on the Mount are the 'Beatitudes', which as a child, I had to learn by heart, and if your education was anything like mine, you also probably know them very well. In them, Jesus speaks of people who seek a right relationship with God as 'blessed'. Even if their lives contain unhappiness and suffering, they are 'blessed' and can find mercy, peace and comfort in the love of God. And then, in the specific reading for today, Jesus reminded His listeners of how valuable they were to God, and we are too. Jesus likens God to a caring parent who knows us individually and knows what we need even better than we do. God has not changed in the years since Jesus originally spoke these words.

My second point is don't worry/have faith. It's because of the Father's love for us that we can have faith and not waste hours worrying. Of course, acute anxiety is another thing, and it's wise to seek medical advice for that.

Some of Jesus' listeners would 've been day labourers. They would 've been worried about where the next meal would come from. Other listeners might 've been better off. Their worries might 've been more along the lines of what to wear to the next wedding they'd been invited to, or how to pay their latest tax bill. Jesus gives several reasons why worry won't achieve anything. For example, you can't make yourself live longer by worrying, or some translations of the Bible say you can't make yourself any taller by worrying, which would be even more difficult!

Jesus' words remind us to: "not be anxious about tomorrow ... Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day." With strength from God we can handle what today throws at us. We don't need to spend mental energy dwelling on future upsets that might never happen

What is it you worry about? Remembering that God is like a caring relative who know us individually we can, through daily prayer, tell Him about our daily worries and leave them with Him.

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In Matthew Chapter 6, Jesus explains how much God loves and values each individual person. He repeatedly urges us: “do not worry” and offers guidance on defeating worry.

Jesus advises us to look away from our personal worries to outside of ourselves and His main guidance on defeating worry is my third point, to seek first God’s Kingdom, His sphere of influence, and His righteousness.

The verse just before today’s reading says: “No-one can serve two masters ... You cannot serve both God and Money” (or in the older translations, Mammon). It’s quite easy to get off-track from seeking first God’s Kingdom. We can find ourselves trying to serve both God and something else which might come into your mind.

So how do we seek first God’s Kingdom?

I’ve only begun to know you over the past month, but through talking to you and what I’ve seen, I’ve found out that so many of you do this in various ways. For example, putting God first in your daily schedule with prayer and a Bible reading, putting God first in your time priority in all sorts of Christian service, voluntary activity in the community, or spending hours of your time lovingly caring for someone.

It may be that there are other areas of life in which you can put God first ...
...In your money management and charitable giving? ... In further support for the Narthex project ... or Birmingham Diocese’s partnership with the church’s work in Malawi – a country negatively affected by climate change?
... In relationships with family, friends or neighbours? ... In considering changing a few aspects of your daily routines, or changing certain aspects of tradition that could become a hindrance to other people finding Christ?

But how can we get back on track, to putting first God’s Kingdom and righteousness?

It’s necessary to trust God and remember the whole of verse 33: “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well”, echoed in that well known hymn: “All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above”. If some people are short of what they need, it may be that other people need to share more.

So today and this week, I really want you to be inspired by remembering the Father’s loving concern for each one of us; second try not to worry,

keep your faith in God and His provision; and third be encouraged to keep on seeking first God's kingdom.

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Amen.