

## Lives lived in the sight of God's kingdom

31st July 2016

*A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost 2016:*

How can we live our lives well, with integrity to our values, when these values are challenged by a constant stream of terror, bloodshed and pain? How can we live as people of faith when our own belief in a hope-filled future is constantly shaken by the events around us, such as last week's attacks on the people of Germany, particularly the people of my birthplace, Munich. These events are not isolated, but have been framed by other attacks in Würzburg and Ansbach, Tokyo, Nice and Rouen. Many believe these events to be deliberate attacks on our belief in a provident God; attacks in our hope for a fair and just, peace-filled world; attacks on our faith in the God who assures us: 'do not worry about tomorrow'.

I believe that particularly in the light of such events, in the midst of mourning and anxiety, of uncertainty and hopelessness, it is vital that we reaffirm our faith in the God who assures, calls and equips us to live lives that speak of a greater good than ourselves. That is why we come together tonight, as people from many cultural backgrounds, nationalities and denominations to hear again God's invitation to place our cares, our fears, our anger and our grief, our departed loved ones into his hands, and to be assured that God's plan for each of us, and for his world, is for us to be made whole, to be healed and to be at peace. How God's vision for us is to be people at peace with ourselves and with God, who are sent out to be ambassadors of that peace in a world at war, in terror; a broken world that longs for peace.

Tonight's readings are an invitation to explore together how we may live lives that enable us to become whole and rounded people. How we may live our lives in touch with all that has been so far: the blessings and the fears, the hurts and the joys of our own lives and those of the communities with which we are linked. How we may live our lives in the hope of all that will be: our hopes, our expectations, our anxieties as well as our ambitions for the future. How we can live lives that make use of our God-given gifts and talents, our principles and initiative, in the service of others as well as working towards the fulfilment of our own personal hopes for wholeness and peace. How we can live lives in God's friendship and come to rely on his provision for our needs. How God seeks to equip each one of us to become people who may work together to transform this world, longing for peace, for good.

Our readings reinforce the insight that God holds in his hands our past and present. Tonight's second reading from Luke's Gospel encourages us that God seeks to shape a hope-filled future for each one of us, personally and corporately, as a community of believers (Joel 2.23-30, Luke 2.22-31). Jesus invites his disciples to develop a personal reliance on God's purposes for them. He assures them not to worry about life and, in particular, not to worry so much about details as to lose sight of the bigger picture. Jesus tells the disciples: 'Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear—is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?' (Luke 12.22-23). Life is much greater than our daily concerns, Jesus explains when he challenges them: 'Can you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?' (22.25).

It is at this point that Jesus turns the argument on its head: only when we let go of our worries, he suggests, can we ever experience God's care. Only when we cease to rely on doing things in our own strength alone, can we come to experience God's provision for us, he tells his listeners. 'Consider the lilies of the fields, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these', he illustrates his point. 'Therefore, if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, you of little faith?' (22.28).

Paradoxically, confidence and hope can only grow where we are prepared to let go, Jesus tells his disciples. As long as his hearers do not give up their petty and self-centred outlook on life—what will we eat, what will we drink, what will we wear—their faith will remain just as little. Only when we begin to strive for the bigger things—God's kingdom and God's justice—will our confidence in God and his purposes grow. The paradox lies in this: only when we stop worrying about them, the things we would have worried about will be given to us. Only when we stop worrying about tomorrow will we be able to live today, will we be able truly to inhabit the present moment.

'Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own: today's trouble is enough for today', Jesus taught his disciples. Previously he had instructed his disciples to pray: 'give us today our daily bread' – give us each day enough for that day. Jesus invites us to live our lives in terms of the 'Lord's Prayer'—letting go of our daily concerns in order to be able to walk through life with our eyes firmly fixed on the horizon, focussing on those things that truly are of lasting importance: God's kingdom and its justice, and the way in which Christ's values can transform us, our society, and this broken world we live in.

Which brings me our first reading, from the prophecy of Joel. The prophet Joel speaks to the people of Israel of the times of the Messiah when God will bring in his kingdom, and the world will be transformed so that his 'people shall never again be put to shame' (Joel 2.26). At that time, God promises, 'I will pour out my spirit on all flesh: your sons and daughters shall prophecy, the old shall dream dreams, and the young shall see visions' (2.28)). At the heart of the vision of God's kingdom stand the dreams of the old, and the visions and prophecies of the young, the prophet Joel tells. Our own visions and prophecies—and prophecy here is as much dependent on a sense of imagination and insight as it is on an actual vision or foretelling of times to come—our vision of this world is what will shape the future of events. Our own imagination, our hopes and insights will help shape our future world, the prophet tells.

And the way in which God will equip his people—prophets and dreamers alike—is by giving them his Spirit, is by speaking to everyone who would listen to his voice. By his Holy Spirit, the prophet foretells, God will transform people, and empower them to accomplish great things—things that will change the face of the earth for good. Our first reading assures us that God wants us to hold on to our hopes and dreams, to nurture our aspirations and vision, our living and our prayer in the service of others. God seeks us to use all our gifts—our sense of inquiry, our skills of reasoning and reflection, our creativity and our enthusiasm, our capacity to cope with disappointment and our resilience, our ability to love others and to accept ourselves as we are—in the service of his kingdom. Through the prophet Joel God assures us that this world can be changed. And that it will be changed by people like you and me.

Shaping this world for good can be painful, and certainly will be hard. Especially at times like these, when the people around us clamour for curtailment of our accustomed freedoms, for harsh retributions for the truly terrible acts that have shaken our world and our communities. But our readings tells us clearly that God's answer to destruction is not by repaying with death but life, that God's answer to pain and fear is hope and the gift of his Spirit. Our readings invite us to lift our eyes daily beyond the narrow horizons that, if we focus only on them, will certainly shape a future of despair. Instead we are invited to lift our eyes high to regard the lofty vision of a spirit-filled world, where those who have sought and found God's friendship are equipped by God to dream the dreams, and behold the visions that will, ultimately, help transform this world.

I encourage you to hold fast to the hope of tonight's Scriptures: the confidence that God does not give us a spirit of fear or cowardice, but a spirit of peace. And that God seeks us to share that gift of peace with others. In the fear and terror of this world, we not only have grounds for hope, but also agency to work for good in the places in which we work, live and worship. We can change this world, and its fears, through our prayers – which we can offer however enabled or disabled we may feel – we can change our world through our speaking and encouragement, through our lobbying of our politicians to work for respectful, welcoming communities. Just as we can change our world through our own outreach to migrants and refugees who need our assistance in making this place their home.

And we can change this world – and this is just as important, since so many of the recent radicalised young men suffered ill mental health and felt excluded from their communities – we can change this world by offering a listening ear, hearing the stories of hurt and fear, of terror experienced, of those whose hearts are in danger of breaking or hardening. We are enabled, equipped, tonight's readings encourage us, to be God's agents for peace in this world, by the works of faith, hope and love you and I do in God's name. We are enabled to be God's signs of peace regardless of terror and fear, whenever we choose to continue to pray, love and embrace even and especially when others choose to hate, kill and exclude.

And so I encourage you to entrust your future into the hand of God. May we together journey on from this place in the spirit of our two readings: with our eyes firmly fixed on the horizon, living lives that are connected, within themselves, with one another and with God. May we live lives that are signs of the hope that lies within us in this fragile, beautiful, hurting world; that are signs of the peace, and the spirit of love that God seeks to shed abroad through the old and the young, the dreamer, the prophet and the visionary, through you and through me.

It is my prayer for you and for me that, in times of difficulty and worry like these, God would lift our eyes from our narrow horizons to the vision of his kingdom that he sets before us. That God would give us the ability to walk through life not worrying about tomorrow but instead tackling today's trouble confident of his grace. It is my prayer for you and for me that, through the Spirit he pours out on all people, God would continue to inspire and empower us to strive to transform this world into a place where all may live out the values of his kingdom, and to find that kingdom to be a place of infinite love, and unfathomable peace.