

Sunday 23 August: Do Not Worry About Tomorrow

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Fifth Sunday of Lent.

Readings: [Exodus 1.8-2.10](#); [Romans 12.1-8](#); [Matthew 16.13-20](#)

How can we live our lives well, with integrity to our values, when these values are challenged by the effects of the current pandemic? Challenged by sickness, the pain of being isolated from friends and family, the fear of losing jobs or loved ones, the sorrow of not being able to attend the funerals or weddings of loved ones interstate or overseas? How can we live as people of faith when our faith in a hope-filled future is constantly shaken by the challenges of events beyond our control. In times like the current Coronavirus crisis, how can we strengthen our faith in the God who assures us: 'do not worry about tomorrow'.

In the midst of anxiety, uncertainty and hopelessness, it is essential that we reaffirm our faith in God. The God of grace who assures, calls and equips us to live our lives of faith. Lives that speak of a greater good than ourselves. That is why this afternoon I would like to think with you about God's invitation to place our cares, our fears, our anger and our grief, and our departed loved ones into his hands. God's plan for each of us, and for his world, is for us to be made whole, to be healed and at peace. God's vision for us is to be people at peace with ourselves and with God. In turn, God sends us out to be ambassadors of that peace and hope in a world that longs for peace and hope.

The readings this afternoon are invitations to explore together how we may live in a way that enables us to become whole and rounded people. How we may live our lives connected to all that has been before: 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 the gifts and talents God has gifted us, in the service of others. How our values and actions may be used to work towards the fulfilment of our own personal hopes for wholeness and peace. How we can live in the friendship of God and come to rely on his provision for our needs. How God seeks to equip us to become people who may work together to transform this world—a place that so often is hurting and longing for peace—for good.

Our readings (Joel 2.23-30, Matthew 6.25-34) tell us that God holds our past and present in his hands. This afternoon's gospel reading encourages us that God seeks to shape a hope-filled future for each one of us: as a community of believers, both personally and corporately. Jesus invites his disciples to develop a personal reliance on God's purposes for them. He assures them not to worry about life. In particular he tells them 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?' (Matthew 6.25-23). 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?' (6.28).

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. He tells his listeners that only when we cease to rely on doing things in our own strength alone, can we come to experience God's provision for us. '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?' (6.28-30).

Jesus tells his disciples that, paradoxically, confidence and hope can only grow where we are prepared to let go. 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, and 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. Just as he had previously taught his disciples to pray: 'give us today our daily bread'. 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—is what will shape the future of events. Our own imagination, our hopes and insights will help shape our future, 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 find it hard to deal with the curtailment of accustomed freedoms, find it hard to live with lockdowns and curfews. But our readings tell us clearly that God's answer to sickness and death is by repaying death with 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 beyond the narrow horizons that, if we focus only on them, will certainly shape a future of despair. They invite us to lift our sight high. They encourage us 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 this afternoon'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 of this pandemic, we not only have grounds for hope, but also agency to work for good in the places where 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 – through our speaking and encouragement. Through our giving of self and money to support those who are doing it tough. And by our giving to support our own family of faith.

And we can do so by offering a listening ear to those who find it particularly hard to deal with the effects of the current pandemic, hearing the stories of pain and fear experienced, of those whose hearts are in danger of breaking or hardening. We are enabled, this afternoon's readings encourage us, to be God's agents for wholeness and 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 the fear of this pandemic, whenever we choose to continue to pray, love, embrace and serve one another.

And so I encourage you to entrust your future into the hand of God. May we go out together from this place in the spirit of our 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.

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 the troubles of today, 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.