

“Seek ye first the kingdom of God”

The Gospel lesson appointed for this fifteenth Sunday after Trinity represents the climax of the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Chapters 5-7 of St. Matthew's Gospel. The counsels of the Sermon on the Mount are counsels of perfection, and much of the history of the Church consists of the search for and striving after that simple perfection of life. It is the simplest and yet most difficult of all sermons. Simple, by virtue of its uncompromising directness: you cannot serve two masters; you cannot serve God and mammon; you cannot serve God and riches. And difficult, because its' implementation seems almost impossible in this day and age. Be not anxious about food and drink and clothing. In the maelstrom of credit cards and mortgage payments and tax credits and Social Security and cholesterol counts and Medicare and all the rest, we are to stop and consider the birds and the lilies?? *They toil not, neither do they spin, yet even Solomon, in all his glory, was not arrayed as one of these.* It is simple, and direct, and appealing; but is it possible? It is simple, no doubt, for sentiment, but Oh, so immensely difficult in actuality. *“O ye of little faith,”* says Jesus. *“Seek ye first God's kingdom, and all these things shall be added unto you.”*

This Gospel has been termed “the anxiety gospel” by Fr. David Curry of Christ Church in Windsor, Nova Scotia. Our anxieties are the cares which choke and oppress us, the cares which give us great anguish of body and soul. They are all of our anxieties about the deeply troubling and perplexing affairs of the larger world as we contemplate the seemingly endless parade of death and destruction by famine, war, and weather, not to mention the horrifying spectacles of terrorism. They are all of our anxieties about the economy, about jobs, about health care, about political life at every level of government, about our families, our schools, our parishes, and our environment. We have become, I think, a remarkably anxious people, fearful and fretful about *“a multitude of things”*.

But these counsels of perfection, are they some kind of beautiful and romantic, but impossible dream? Jesus makes it clear that his counsels are for here and now. Listen to what he says at the conclusion of the sermon: *“Whosoever heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them, I will liken him to a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, and it fell not, for it was founded upon a rock”*.

“Seek ye first the kingdom of God.” What Jesus intends is a direct and eminently practical lesson about life here and now. And that portion of his sermon which is today's Gospel lesson is an eminently practical lesson about our involvement with this world's concerns and this world's goods. We are so easily seduced into regarding these things as ends in themselves. That is what it means to serve Mammon. Today's Gospel would remind us that the things of this world, however good, are not ends--but means: means towards an end which is spiritual and eternal--the knowledge and love of God, of God's kingdom and his righteousness.

Mammon is a false God, and the service of Mammon is idolatry. And it is the essence of idolatry to trust the things of the world as though they were of final and ultimate significance. Idolatry is the worship of worldly things, and it is a subtle, but constant, ever-present danger to the spiritual lives of all of us. That's what St. Paul has in mind, when he says to the Galatians in today's Epistle lesson: *"But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."*

The point is not that we should forgo or escape from the toils and the satisfactions and the trials of life in this world, but that we should see in all these things their limitations through the perspective of the spiritual end they serve. Who by being anxious can add one minute to the length of this life? Life is more than reaping and gathering into barns. The point is that we should see our life and our labors in the context of the Providence of God--that "*perpetual mercy*" of which today's Collect speaks--that Providence which moves all things firmly and sweetly to their divinely appointed end. And in that perspective, how foolish is all our anxiety.

And yet, the "real world" as we would say is full of anxieties; we are prone to being anxious, quite literally, about "*a multitude of things*". It is "The Martha Syndrome" as diagnosed (*Luke 10.41*) by Jesus: "*Martha, Martha, thou art anxious and troubled about a multitude of things*". We all have our fears and our worries, our troubles and our concerns, our heart-aches and our despairs. And we can worry ourselves, quite literally, to death about them. Stress is the contemporary word describing the impact of our anxieties, and the fact that we focus not so much on **what** we are anxious about as **how are we going to cope** with such things is indicative of the issue we face.

Jesus says "*be not anxious*" and he says it more than once in this gospel. Is this simple "*be not anxious*" which Jesus keeps saying as if it were some sort of magical mantra really the key to dealing with our anxieties? Is Jesus saying, in effect as the MAD magazine generation that many of us grew up in might have said, "What; me worry!"; or as contemporary culture might say with cynical indifference, "whatever"? Is the antidote to our being "*full of cares*" simply to **be careless**? The answer is No. The threefold "*be not anxious*" of the gospel is not the antidote to "The Martha Syndrome", though it offers a necessary check, a moment of pause, a counter-assertion, from which we might then be able to receive the real antidote.

What is the real antidote to anxiety? It is a new way of looking at the world. "*Seek ye first the kingdom of God*". Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God is discerned in these little things like birds and flowers; we are to see in them the care of our heavenly Father for every living thing, and how much more, his care for us.

The recollection of God's providence is the strong answer to our anxieties. Why? Because it reminds us that God's care and purpose for us and his world override our immediate concerns and cares. In our anxieties, we forget that this is God's world. Our role is to find our place in His world, and not the other way around. The world is not merely the stage for frightening and terrifying acts of raw, brute nature or for the appearance of divine power as something which

can frighten and oppress us. There is a power and beauty in a thunder-storm, but that power and beauty ultimately belongs to God, to the manifestation of His divine glory - and love for us. Thunder-storms bring rain, and rain brings life. If we are not alive to that wonder and respect it, then we are oppressed by it; the world becomes an alien and frightening place – full of anxiety. Nor are we to view the world as simply a place for us and our purposes. The usefulness of nature to humans cannot be our primary objective, or we become slaves in an environment where the world exists only if we find and give a purpose to it – a situation also full of anxiety.

“O ye of little faith”, Jesus says. That is the issue! It is all about how we see the world. Is it God’s world, or our world? It is God’s world! We need to develop faith in the perception of ourselves as creatures of God’s will and purpose, who ultimately see the world in God. We need to have faith that God has a plan for His creation, which includes us, and that God will see His plan ultimately played out. This is the counter to our preoccupations, to our anxieties, to our endless use of things of this world as if they exist only to please us. This is the attitude and tendency which we have to adopt. As it says in the Epistle, we have to crucify our desire to control and manipulate the world; otherwise we end up being consumed by the use we make of things, serving Mammon – worldly riches – and not God.

Seek first God's kingdom - and in His eternal Providence, His perpetual mercy, God will provide for us. **Amen.**