

8th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

The First Reading sets the tone of today's reflection. In one of the simplest and most intimate images of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet Isaiah speaks to people like us who wonder whether God may have forgotten or forsaken us. He assures us that God is like a mother reflecting in love on the child in her womb, or feeding us from the breast. God cannot forget us.

Jesus, who addressed God in prayer with the simple and affectionate 'Abba!(my dear Father)' understood this trust. He would often have prayed today's Responsorial Psalm, for he knew that ultimately his soul was waiting expectantly for God. No one and nothing else can satisfy our yearning. In today's Gospel Jesus asks his disciples to look to God in trust and to stop seeking security in material possessions or in any of the other wastelands where our hungry souls forage in vain.

Yet the simple message of the Gospel can pose problems to the sophisticated modern mind. Let us look at what Jesus is not saying. He is not encouraging irresponsibility and he is not inviting us to escape into a make-believe world. After all, birds do starve and lilies sometimes die before they bloom. So do people, including those who have placed their trust in God and have looked to him in their need only to find themselves victims of famine, war and persecution. Jesus himself cried out to God in his agony (Matthew 26:39), but he still died an excruciating death. Nor were Matthew and his community strangers to persecution and suffering (see Matthew 5:11-12).

Of course we need food and clothing and we need to act responsibly to meet our own needs and the needs of others. Jesus is telling us not to make these needs the central concerns of our anxious lives, forgetting that it is God who provides them and who cares for us. While living responsibly, we are not to 'worry' about these things. This same call to trust God is repeated later in the gospel when Jesus says: 'When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time'(Matthew 10:19). Worry can suffocate us. It can eat away at our ability to cope with the situation we find ourselves in. 'The seed that is sown among thorns, refers to the person who hears the word, but the worries of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing'(Matthew 13:22).

Paul expresses well the proper focus in life for a disciple: 'Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you'(Philippians 4:6-9).

Peter learned this lesson well and in his turn wrote to the Christian community: 'Cast all your anxieties on God, because he cares for you'(1Peter 5:7). We find the same message in the Letter to the Hebrews: 'Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you"'(Hebrews 13:5).

Jesus is inviting his disciples to a deeper trust. God knows what we really need, and will always provide it (compare Matthew 6:8). We see a powerful example of this towards the end of Jesus' life. What Jesus wanted in his agony was one thing; what he really needed was another. What he really needed on the cross was the love of God to sustain him and to enable him to endure his suffering in love and to commit his spirit to God. His eyes were not distracted from looking to God and his heart remained fixed on God, and so his whole body was 'full of light'(Matthew 6:22). He is inviting us to the same trust. Jesus is calling us to be 'poor in spirit'(Matthew 5:3). While living responsibly, we are to be like children, peacefully leaving tomorrow in God's hands and living today in trust. Our whole desire should be to belong to Jesus and so share in the kingdom of God which is already present in him while we work to do the will of God and bring about the final goal of God's beautiful and loving design for the world.

And tomorrow? There is no point in being anxious about it. While tomorrow is tomorrow it is a figment of our imagination. As such it is all too easy for it to engage our worst fears, our lack of trust in ourselves as loved, the wounds left from past hurts. If tomorrow is ever to have reality it will only be when it is today. We can handle the real. Jesus invites us to face today's problems in trust, for God is more than sufficient to achieve his gracious design through the problems that beset us or in spite of them. I conclude with the words of the fourteenth century English mystic, Julian of Norwich: 'He did not say: You will not be assailed, you will not be belaboured, you will not be disquieted; but he said: You will not be overcome. God wants us to pay attention to his words, and always to be strong in faithful trust, in well-being and in woe, for he loves us and delights in us, and so he wishes us to love him and delight in him and trust greatly in him, and all will be well'(Showings chapter 68).