

Homily for Harvest Thanksgiving Service 2015 based on Matthew 6: 24-34

“Don’t Worry About Your Life” Really, Jesus?

This is an interesting passage the lectionary has selected for a harvest thanksgiving service. Here we have gathered to thank God for God’s many blessings in our lives, at the time of year when many crops are being harvested and we hear a scripture that tells us that birds don’t gather food into barns and God feeds them so don’t worry about what to eat or drink or wear because God knows what we need.

What is your instinctive response to this passage? Every time I hear it, I am almost ashamed to say, I immediately think of that silly song from back in the 90’s, Don’t Worry, Be Happy. Then my next response is, that ‘don’t worry about your life’ is may be easier for Jesus to say, him being the son of God and all! But, we live in the real world. What would happen if everyone stopped working and saving and buying and storing up food and just stopped generally taking care of life and business and sat around and said, I’m not going to worry about it, God will take care of me? Jesus really isn’t saying that is he? It sounds kind of irresponsible – and impossible.

And then I think of my own life, to this point anyway, and that ‘don’t worry about your life’ feels like it goes against the work ethic my immigrant parents raised me by. They came to this country with very little, and had to work hard to raise me and my 2 brothers, and taught us the value of hard work and a dollar. I married a farmer and raised 2 children, grew much of our own food, worked off farm, and put myself through university--twice -- I know only too well and have a deep appreciation of what hard work is and what money means. And my story is by no means unique, many of you have very similar life stories of hard work and challenges overcome. Don’t worry about your life, Hah! Really Jesus? We have to provide for our families, we have to work, we have to eat, we need clothing, especially in this country! Not only that, but Jesus calls us to help feed and clothe those who are unable to do so themselves. That’s not to say I don’t count my blessings. And don’t get me wrong, I’m really not complaining, I have been truly blessed in so many ways. But seriously what would happen if we don’t worry about this kind of stuff—and then do something about that worry? What does Jesus really mean?

Hmm, seems this bible reading brought up some strong emotions! Well, when a scripture reading does that, it’s time to look into it a bit more, dig a little deeper, think through a little more carefully about why we’re responding so emotionally to what we *think* is being said.

Ok, so, maybe this is another one of those exaggerated examples that Jesus often uses to get his point across. Maybe that’s just what Jesus was trying to do-- get the goat of those who were listening to him! Thinking through this not harvesting and storing of food suggestion--without growing and storing up food, humanity would have died out before they really even became homo sapiens. We are long, long, past the hunter-gatherer stage! Even in the warmer climates and back in Jesus’ time, goodness, even before Jesus’ time there were farmers and store houses for food. Remember Joseph of the coat of many colours fame—God gave Joseph the dream that told him to store up enough food for the 7 lean years that were to come, and because he did that, a whole nation of people survived a famine, including Joseph’s brothers and their entire clan. And what of all those shepherd stories Jesus told—the shepherds are the ones who provided the lamb for the tables and the wool to weave into clothing. People have to eat and wear something! And what of the people whose businesses supported Jesus and the disciples as they travelled? We read in Luke chapter 8 about ‘Joanna, whose husband Chusa was Herod’s administrator; Susanna; and many other women, (who) ... provided financial support for Jesus and his disciples.’ (Luke 8.3) So, Jesus and his disciples directly benefitted from the work of others. Jesus can’t mean we should stop working for a living then!

The question comes to mind as to why would those women financially support a man who was essentially an itinerant preacher? Well, because they had become believers in Jesus and his message of love and care, some of them personally, as Jesus had cured them of disease or infirmity. They had come to know and believed in Jesus' message of loving neighbour as self, had come to really believe that all things, including Jesus, comes from God, our Creator. This is the same God who loves the humanity God created; so much so, in fact, that God gave us the wonders of the entire creation for our use, asking only that we share from our abundance. And our abundance comes from God's own creation which God so graciously has given us.

Do not worry, God will provide Jesus assures his disciples. After all God feeds the birds, clothes the fields with grasses, and if God cares for the birds and the fields, will our Creator not care for the one's created in the Creator's own image, oh-- we of little faith? Yes, of course, that is what we believe, and what Jesus tells us over and over in scripture. God provides and provides abundantly! That is what thanksgiving and harvest festivals are about, a reminder that all we have does come from God, as much as we'd like to think that it's all about us and how hard we work and deserve all we can buy. Jesus' message was contrary to the message of the society of his time and is still contrary today, in this financially based society that tells us about how more is better, newer is better, bigger is better. That's the mantra of the economic engine that drives the global economy, the economy of wanting more and more and more, convincing us that our self worth becomes dependant on our buying power and our ability to accumulate, and we deserve all that we can put our hands on.

Do not worry, Jesus says four times in these few verses. To be worried means to be overly anxious, to be so concerned as to cause stress upon oneself. When we worry we focus on the object of our stressors, so we come to focus on the things that we can buy, a merry-go-round of never ever having enough. Just like the Gentiles Jesus is referring to—it is the Gentiles who strive for all those things, Gentiles, being the term used for all those who don't believe in God.

But what if we did stop worrying, stopped stressing and living lives focussed on having to keep up with the latest and the newest and getting more and bigger stuff and let that go, and truly lived in faith that God does provide what we need. Our value is not based on our buying power, but on how we decide to use what we have. How do we decide? Well, if we truly believe that all we have does come from God, and even the skills, gifts, attributes and talents that we each have, and have used in our lives and in our work—if they too are gifts from God, it follows that all we are and all that we work for is from God. So it is God grace and abundance that has allowed us to live the incredibly blessed lives that we do. If we really believe all is a gift of God, and that to love Christ means to share of the abundance that we receive from God, even when we give away from what we have, we'll never really run out, because God does and will provide, and keeps providing, again and again and again. So we really can believe what³¹ Jesus tells his followers, "So, don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?'³² These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs.³³ Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and (God) will give you everything you need. (Mt 6, NLT)