

YOU MUST BE JOKING

Joel 2. 21-27

1 Timothy 2. 1-7

Matthew 6. 25-33

I speak to you in the name of ✠ the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Dare I say it? An honest response to the gospel passage we heard this morning is:
'Lord, you must be joking. You're telling us not to worry?'

'Therefore I tell you', Jesus says, 'do not worry about your life.' And as hard as it might be for us to believe, he is not kidding.

I don't know if you have noticed it, but here we are at the end of September, and already some shop merchants in Guernsey have started to display Christmas items on their shelves. In the good old days, November used to mark the official beginning of the Christmas shopping season. This season, which is already just outside our doors, might (with only slight exaggeration) be called the Season of Anxiety. So it is a good thing to pause today, when we celebrate the Harvest Festival and give thanks; and consider what anxiety is, and why Christ speaks about it.

We might say that anxiety is a form of self-bestowal. It is one of the ways in which human beings give themselves over to something else. If we are anxious about our life, what we shall eat or what we shall drink, we are investing ourselves in those things: drink, food, and so forth. A man who is anxious about what he will eat is turning his mental energies over to food; he is thinking about it, picturing it, imagining alternative menus, worrying that he might not have food at all. It's taking up his time, as we say; it's occupying him (not unlike the way a foreign power might occupy a territory).

Likewise a woman who is anxious about her body, and what she shall put on: she is (in a figurative sense) occupied territory; she has given herself over to concern with her clothing and other such things.

But we might think, ‘What is wrong with our bestowing ourselves upon things like these?’ It’s not that we don’t need them. Our Lord in fact assures us that we do need food, drink, and clothing. But he also assures us that God knows what we need. Think of his examples. They are, to my ears, some of the most moving lines of scripture, like sweetly flowing poetry. ‘Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.’ And a bit later: ‘Consider the lilies of the field, 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.’

Jesus’s point is clear enough. The problem is not self-concern. The problem is where we invest ourselves. When we are anxious about these things, we are acting as if God had no business to do with them. Does God have nothing to do with feeding us, clothing us, or giving us drink? When we are anxious about our life, we forget that God cares to meet our needs.

The particular anxieties of food, drink, the body, and clothing all follow from the first anxiety, which is over our life. ‘Do not worry about your life’; that’s the first thing that Christ says. But if we are not to worry, what is the alternative? If we are not to bestow ourselves upon food, drink, and the lot, what is the right way to bestow ourselves?

The alternative, our Lord says, is the kingdom of his Father. But strive first for (or seek), the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Instead of bestowing ourselves anxiously upon the things of life, Jesus invites us to bestow ourselves on his Father, seeking righteousness, seeking his kingdom.

This teaching of Christ on anxiety comes in St Matthew's gospel about three-fourths the way through the Sermon on the Mount. Now in order to understand anything in the Sermon on the Mount, we need remember what is at its centre. And that, both in terms of literary structure and in terms of content, is the Lord's Prayer. This is important, because the sermon has a lot to say about what we should do, and about how we live our lives. But the *centre* of what we do must be prayer. Putting it another way, we could say that the centre of ethics is spirituality.

In the prayer that is the centre of our Lord's teaching, including his teaching on anxiety, we find also a reference to the kingdom. 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' And what do you know? The very next line addresses anxiety. 'Give us this day our daily bread.' It's just as Jesus said: our heavenly Father (to whom the prayer is addressed) knows all the things we need. First, seek the kingdom. Then everything else will follow.

Dear friends! In a few moments, we will eat the Bread of Heaven, a phrase which is interesting, is it not? 'Bread of heaven' contains the word 'heaven', the place where God is, and who invites us to address him as, 'Our Father, who art in heaven'. And the phrase also contains the word 'bread', that which we are not to be anxious about but which we ask our heavenly Father to give us. The Bread of Heaven: *here* is the place of non-anxiety; *here* is the food over which we fret not.

But then, after the Eucharist, after the Post-Communion Prayer and a hymn, and we're out of here, back out there, thrown smack into the Season of Anxiety. What can we do? The lilies of the field have no Christmas season to prepare for. The birds of the air have no Christmas parties to attend.

We can, it seems to me, turn the tables and give the problem back to God. We can pray God to keep us attentive to where we are bestowing ourselves. *We can watch*

where we put our hearts. Do we really want to put it in food and drink, clothing and wrapping paper? Where do we want to put our *souls*?

May God grant that we bestow ourselves not upon such things, but upon God himself. In so doing we of course show ourselves to be thankful for food and drink, clothing and wrapping paper, and all the other things God knows we need. Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to us as well.

Amen.