

## **Sermon for Second Sunday before Lent, 16 February, 2020**

### ***'The Kingdom of Heaven'* (Romans 8: 18-25 ; Matthew 6: 25-34).**

We see an interesting counterpoint in the readings set for today: the contrast between the spiritual virtues of 'hope' and 'righteousness' with the spiritual destruction caused by worry. Hope is essentially optimistic. It sees God's love, compassion and wisdom as the foundation of the universe and of all life. Worry, on the other hand, is pessimistic; it is always on the lookout for things that might go wrong and focuses on things that haven't yet happened, and indeed, things that might never happen!

The great preacher, William Barclay, once recalled the story of a certain Doctor Greatheart who was famous for the example of Christian good cheer he gave to his family and community. The doctor was paralysed and had been bed-ridden for many years; nonetheless, he always had a radiant smile and cheerful demeanour, so that people who visited him forgot to feel sorry for him, and left his bed-side feeling uplifted and inspired. Barclay recounts how, when one of his sons was preparing to leave the family nest to go off and make his way in the world, the much loved doctor gave him some good advice: "Do your best when faced with a challenge, and please remember, the biggest troubles you have got to face are those that never come!" In other words, worry about the future is a wasted effort, and the future reality is seldom as bad as the future one fears.

As we may have experienced, niggling worries can become obsessive and have harmful effects on health, even paving the way for such conditions as stomach ulcers, heart conditions, skin disorders, dietary problems and other medical issues. The mind has great power and influence, and it can do much damage, if it isn't put to good employment. Hence, the most important task one can undertake on the spiritual path, is to learn how to govern and direct the mind, to ensure that it is used for benefit and not for harm. For this reason, if we are serious about making spiritual progress, then contemplation and meditation are two of the most practical and beneficial activities we can engage in, to make good use of our human lives, and not waste our time solely on leisure and pleasure, and such unworthy thoughts and emotions as anger, jealousy, hatred, resentment, and so on...

Worry about bodily needs and the cares of this life is, Jesus teaches his disciples, an unworthy and time-wasting use of mental energy. It is much better, Jesus affirms, to strive for the *Kingdom of God* – by which he means the inner treasure of God's peace and love in the depths of our hearts – and for righteousness – that is, goodness and kindness as the motive forces for our thoughts, words and actions, than to focus on unworthy ends. If a desire to spiritually benefit our sisters and brothers and all God's creatures lies at the heart of all we do, then our motivation is one of loving-kindness and is fundamentally and inherently righteous.

Jesus's advice is very practical: he counsels his followers not to get things out of perspective and proportion. Naturally, we need to be prudent in managing our affairs, and we need to use common sense in order to plan effectively for the future. In our church life in this parish of Mottingham St Andrew with St Alban our 'Mission Action Plan' or MAP, with its core objectives of growing in numbers and in funds, improving administrative operations and communications, and of course, spiritual development and engagement with social justice issues, give us clear indications regarding areas for future development and improvement. In

realising these objectives, it is essential to have clear plans and detailed actions. Prudent planning is very beneficial, and is poles apart from fretful and fruitless worrying.

As St Paul teaches in our first reading set for today, Jesus came to set us free from worry and the futility of worldly life. He offers us freedom from decay and from worldly cares, and the opportunity, instead, to found our lives upon the *Kingdom* values of:

- a) Selfless love and compassion
- b) Wise spiritual study and practice
- c) The joy that arises from spiritual striving
- d) The peace of the Holy Spirit, which passes all understanding, and
- e) A thirst for God's justice.

Such values provide us with a firm and satisfying foundation for life.

These kingdom values are accompanied by the great hope and optimism won by Christ for those who find their way in faith to Him, that believers may share in the glory of His Resurrection to eternal life. This hope is nothing less, St Paul proclaims in the first reading from *Romans*, than the promise that Christ's resurrection body is a **blueprint** for the body of glory that believers are to inherit as the fruits of the seed of faith. Such a glorious hope banishes niggling worries and the self-cherishing anxieties of our everyday egos. Our Lord counsels us instead, in the Gospel passage for today, to focus our thoughts upon God's Kingdom of righteousness and love. To this firm foundation we add the great hope that our Lord Jesus Christ has won for us: that those who turn to Him in faith are granted a share in the glory of his Resurrection to eternal life. Amen.

*Revd Ian Welch*