

## Introduction

Jesus was one of the most inspirational and influential teachers of all time. He had a wonderful way with words and a marvelous way of using real-life illustrations to make his point. It is no wonder that crowds flocked to hear him and that many committed their lives to following him.

His words live with us today; they shape us and affect our lives because they are radical and transformational. If we take what he tells us seriously his words have an astonishing effect on us and others. Yet that's the rub – if we take what he tells us seriously!

For example our Gospel reading today contains some truly inspirational words:

*<sup>25</sup> "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?"*

They are true: - life is much more than food and the body more than clothes, yet these things are important, especially if we have children or others dependant on us to provide for them.

Jesus points to the world around him to back his message up:

*<sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? <sup>27</sup> Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life<sup>[e]</sup>?*

Again absolutely true! But isn't this attitude impractical in today's society? Is Jesus seriously suggesting we give up working for what we need and just start trusting in God to provide?

Let's look a bit more into what he is saying to his listeners. This passage comes towards the end of a body of teaching we

call the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has been defining Christian thinking and behaviour and talking about the attitudes and actions that please God. Our passage today begins, 'Therefore'. I was always taught that when we meet that word in a passage of scripture we need to ask ourselves what it is there for. It looks back to what he has previously said. This passage we just read is the end of a point he has previously been making. So what comes before?

*<sup>19</sup> "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup> But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

So now we are hearing what his original listeners heard and it begins to make sense and to be a bit more achievable for us. It is all about priorities.

The people Jesus was talking to lived very close to nature and their life was precarious. Everything that they ate, drank and wore they produced themselves. They lived by the work of their hands, farming, fishing collecting water from the well, tending animals and bartering their wares. They were at the mercy of the weather and literally might not know from one day to the next where the food would come from. Certainly in times of drought or storm they would have seen very clearly – as we are beginning to in our own environment the impact that nature has on productivity and survival.

The drought in Australia, parts of Africa and in California has meant that certainly, in the developing countries, people are starving and in Australia and America land is being destroyed by fire. In other parts of the world people's livelihoods are being swept away by flood and storm. Here in Cambridgeshire the autumn was a very anxious time for the farmers who struggled to sow the wheat for next year's crops because the fields were water logged. In that context the worldly and

Romans 8:18-25

Matthew 6: 25-34

seemingly practical thing to do is to store up goods, to stockpile what we have against, in the words of the old saying, 'a rainy day'.

Yet, Jesus is saying, that is not what pleases God and is not the best course of action for us. If our priority is to pile up treasures here on earth it means that our emphasis is simply on worldly things. It implies that the most important thing is our physical survival and flourishing; that these things take priority over everything else. And if one lives in a hard to mouth environment you can see that that is pretty much the case. What Jesus wants the people to know is that God loves them and has their best interests at heart and can be trusted to provide for them.

Has it ever struck you what a basically happy person Jesus was? Yes, he knew sorrow and pain but when we read passages such as this we see that his teaching flows straight out of his own experience of life. He had watched the birds wheeling around on the currents of air in the Galilean hills simply enjoying being alive. He had walked amongst the glorious flowers in the hills and by the lake. Neither seemed to do the sort of work that humans do and yet they stayed alive.

Jesus had a lively sense of the goodness of his father, the creator of the world. He knew he could be trusted to care for the people he had created and that he wanted our lives to be rich and full; to be much more than a perpetual struggle for survival.

He goes on to say to his listeners:

*<sup>31</sup> So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' <sup>32</sup> For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. <sup>33</sup> But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

Jesus isn't telling people to be lazy, not to take care of themselves or their dependents and not to provide sensibly for

Romans 8:18-25

Matthew 6: 25-34

their daily needs. What he is saying is that there is so much more to life than food and drink, than money, than power or wealth. These are the things that occupy people who don't know God's goodness. They are important but should not be our priority.

*"Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well"*

So what does it mean to seek God's kingdom?

When Jesus began his ministry he did so announcing that 'The Kingdom of God is close at hand', in the prayer he taught his followers he tells them to say, 'your kingdom come'. God's kingdom, put simply, is his rule on earth. It is a state in which God's will is done and his laws are the framework of society. Jesus proclaimed God's kingdom by healing the sick, curing the blind, allowing lame people to walk and by showing his power over evil. He also related these things to forgiveness of sin.

The establishment of God's kingdom is restoring God's rule on earth in a way it hadn't been since the first human beings chose to go their own way in the Garden of Eden. What Jesus wants his followers to know is that he knows we have needs but our most important need of all is for God to rule in our hearts and minds – all else is secondary.

So what does this mean in practice?

In the Baptism Service those who are becoming Christians are asked 'Do you accept Christ as Saviour? Do you submit to Christ as Lord?' A Christian is someone who understand their need to be rescued from the power of sin and who accepts Jesus' death for them on the cross as the only thing that will bring them close to God as we were made to be. A Christian also submits to Christ as Lord, who allows him to be Boss in their lives and submits their decisions and priorities to his scrutiny and guidance.

**Romans 8:18-25****Matthew 6: 25-34**

This can sound like another kind of captivity or slavery but my experience is that it is a state of joyous freedom. Where we are seeking God's guidance in our decisions, our lifestyle and in our living we have his support and help – we can also be secure in the knowledge that he will provide for all our needs.

This can sound a bit airy fairy but it is something I have experienced in my life again and again. When I believed that God was calling me to be ordained I gave up a secure Job as a staff nurse. It wasn't highly paid but I loved it and I had a regular income. I gave up my home and went back to college for three years living in one room on a student grant. There were times when money was very tight; times, especially when I was unwell, when I didn't know how I would make ends meet. Yet I not only survived but comfortably so. I can remember telling God that what I really needed was a car. I had quite serious health problems and lived a long way from college and I couldn't get about easily. I needed help. Someone gave me the money for a car! I had been quite ill and needed a holiday in warm climes – someone gave me the money for a holiday and someone else gave me spending money. I wasn't going round telling people what I needed. I simply spoke to God and told him what my needs were and people responded, I believe, in answer to my prayers.

There are many people, especially those who seek to serve God through mission or ministry, who quite literally live by faith. Their income is sufficient to enable them not to have to work as well as to preach the gospel but it doesn't allow the luxuries of life. Sometimes they cannot see their way more than a few days ahead – yet God always provides for their needs. God loves us, he understands us deeply. He wants us to have the best in life. That isn't always what we would expect it to be but he can be trusted to care for us when we seek him first.

So what does this passage mean for us today. Here in the twenty first century in rural Cambridgeshire?

Romans 8:18-25

Matthew 6: 25-34

**Firstly it means that our first priority is to seek God's rule in our lives.**

To live by his guidance and leadership and to see his rule established in our homes and in our lives. That isn't always easy, especially when we are married, with partners and children and responsibilities. It isn't always easy at work to put God first because so much of what he requires of us is contrary to popular culture. But God promises us that if we make a close relationship with him a priority he will provide for our needs. He tells us that if we seek his priorities rather than 'storing up treasures on earth' whether in terms of money, possessions, power or fame we will have a much more lasting treasure in terms of an unbreakable relationship with him.

**It also means that we need to live lives that show his righteousness and holiness.** This doesn't mean an empty piety that shows itself in a holier than thou attitude that doesn't stand up to scrutiny. It means living as forgiven free children of God, living by God's standards and seeking to obey him in the way we live and the standards of love and compassion we show.

I was also wondering what these words mean for us as members of God's church here in Foxton (Shepreth). We do worry about the future. It has become clear that with our ageing congregation, our dwindling numbers, lack of young families and an income that barely covers our outgoings we are struggling to survive let alone make an impact on our community. We try to preach the Gospel in our village and in our lives but it is a real struggle.

God calls us to seek his kingdom above everything else. It means that our priority as a church family needs to be worshipping God, living lives that show his love and seeking his will for us and for our community.

This spring I am introducing two things into the life of our benefice whereby I hope we as members of God's family might

Romans 8:18-25

Matthew 6: 25-34

increasingly seek the establishment of his kingdom in our communities and his righteous in our lives

**Praise and worship:**

A monthly time when we can come together in more relaxed surroundings using more modern worship songs to simply praise God. It is my experience that God works through the praises of his people and when we are worshipping him as he has created us to then he works powerfully in our lives

**Being fruitful on the front line**

Lent course : video, Bible Study, discussion that helps us to show God's presence in our daily lives and to produce the fruits of the spirit in all we do

Please let me know if you will come to this so we can plan