

Living for eternity

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, St James and All Saints' February 26 2017

Keynote Bible passage: Matthew 6.24 – 34

Back in October last year I was loaned a book to read while on a personal retreat, a quiet time to be able to reflect and be in prayer. The book has a rather quaint title: 'Living Upwards' and the author is Catholic priest and spiritual writer Richard Rohr. The essence of the book is about our living life, and he divides it into two parts. The first might simply be described as 'getting there' and the second part 'got there'. Fr Rohr includes aspects of the first part as including our working life, 'making ends meet', bringing up family and involvement in the life of church.

The second part is that we have done all these, and achieved what we aspired to – yet there's more to life. I call this part '*living for eternity*' and this being the theme of the sermon. The question is as to how we live life in this second part where there appears to be more freedom of choice. Generally speaking the second part dates from that word 'retirement.' Certainly that's what I can track back to leaving fulltime parish ministry and the freedom of choice to do other things not possible or affordable in ones' working life', and with children now having left home.

Rohr does also suggest that some people can be 'triggered' into the second part prematurely by some traumatic event that has occurred in the person's life or of a loved one. I think that relates to when this occurs the persons are confronted with deep issues of living. And that's something for the second part.

Now – where does this fit into today's theme, linking as we do with the Gospel reading? It's a familiar passage, beginning with the words of Jesus, 'Do not worry'....and then refers to God's provision for the birds of the air and lilies of the field. Then perhaps the key words of the section: Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness...' And concludes with repeating the advice not to worry about tomorrow. May I suggest these are timely words for those of us in the second part of life. For those of you in the first part it is something to which you aspire. So let's consider the key aspects one by one.

1) First, '*do not worry*'. Being realistic I would suggest that is an ideal. We know that in seeking to do those aspects of the first part of life, worry there will be. Worry can derive from work issues, family, health and making provision to make ends meet. The truth in the passage is surely apt: 'can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?' Perhaps Jesus recognises this reality as he acknowledges 'even the Gentiles strive for these things'. Paraphrased this is a generalisation meaning everybody. And further, Jesus says, 'your heavenly Father knows you needs all these things'. I take it from that, it is acceptable and realistic that we need to strive for these things – in the first part of life.

Being realistic then, in the first part of life we *do* have to be concerned about our life, what we will eat and drink and about our body, what we will wear. In the second part of life, as we have aspired to save then this is much less of an issue, and one can focus on other aspects of living.

2) Second, *God's provision*. For a moment think about those lovely words from the passage: 'Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.....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 arrayed like one of these.' In this context in my voyage to islands of the Southern Ocean I was only too aware of these. Thinking about the stormy weather 'The Roaring Forties', one can only admire how albatrosses evolved to be able to live and indeed thrive in such weather so inhospitable to humans [Photo]. I learned that these birds have evolved to be able to sleep while on the wing, and not having to land on dangerous and rough seas. It seems to me here is God's providence in enabling life. Then the lilies of the field and yes they survive, even thriving in the cool climate. [Photo] This is the *bulbinella rossii* – the Ross lily, named by explorer and botanist Sir James Clark Ross. Some were on exposed hillsides and others sheltering in small depressions in the ground.

Thus to all of us and especially those in the second part of life we are to take time to 'be' and appreciate the beauty of God's awesome creation. Remember the Psalmist reflecting, 'when I look at the heaven the work of your fingers and the moon and the stars which you have established....' As we reflect I'm sure you as I marvel at the wonder of creation, and we know the responsibility to keep it that way. Hence in the second part of life I believe we have a responsibility to care and nurture creation, in our garden, in our forest and bush, on our beaches and the sea. A Collect prayer being used today expresses it this way: 'God of life, you have created this beautiful world with great care. As we wonder at Creation help us to discern your great care for us.....'

As I reflect on creation I am very mindful of being in relationship with it, and indeed a partner with God to exercise stewardship, just as was realised by the writer of the creation story in Genesis 1. So it is Jesus takes opportunity to share about a God who provides, and where we fit into that context. As we participate in a Harvest Festival this is a symbolic way of giving back to God what is already God's provision.

3) Now we come to the third and very significant teaching, '*Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness....*' We can take this into account from the words of the song: 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God...' Yet there's another version beginning: '*First set your mind on.. the kingdom of God.* A passage that expands this is from St Paul's letter: 'Fill your minds with those things that are good and deserve praise: things that true, noble, right pure, lovely and honourable. In a parable Jesus likens the kingdom to be a treasure hidden in a field for which a person is prepared to sell all to be able to possess (Mt 13.44). It seems to me this is about *priorities*. The teaching of Jesus recognises we do have earthly needs and to work for these. Yet in determining priorities we need to keep in mind it is Jesus we follow and seek to live in the spirit of his love. This has implications for generosity, compassion, caring, and showing mercy. Thus a balance is what is needed and to keep in mind the priority.

4) Thus especially in the second part of life we are to get on with the Sermon theme: '*Living for eternity.*' Taking time to reflect, it would seem this second part of life is opportunity to prepare for living in 'eternal life future'. We well know we can't take our material possessions with us. Even our 'treasures', not necessarily

material, our books and for me the unique shells and rocks from my 'china cabinet', they can't go either. So – appreciate them while we are able. It seems to me these 'treasures' make us who we are, in relationship and values are these items near and dear. Hence to 'fill your minds'

Then also to focus on spiritual qualities and making choices for these – what is beautiful honourable and pure....St Paul prays that we may 'have a spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints... '{Eph 1.18). In another place he writes of 'the exceeding riches of God's grace' (Eph 2.7).

May I comment the 'strive for' has associations with working hard to achieve. In the first part of life that is true, as we make choices. In the second part of life in my experience it becomes a different way – more like from another translation: '*Seek God's realm* and his goodness, let that be the main purpose in your life'. I would dare suggest, it is for us to '*be aware* of God's realm'. As we do, God's purposes unfold. Richard Rohr describes it thus: 'In the second half of the spiritual life, you are not making choices as much as you are being guided, taught and led – which leads to choice-less choices. One has moved beyond the strong opinions, needs, preferences and demands of the first half of life. You do not need your 'visions' anymore, you are happily participating *in God's vision* for you.' In other words it is not so much in the doing but in the 'be-ing'. In this way we live for eternity.

I conclude with the Collect prayer as referred to earlier, this time in full:

God of life, you have created this beautiful world with great care. As we wonder at Creation round us, help us to discern your great care for each one of us. Free us from anxiety about worldly things that we may concentrate on your kingdom. We ask this through Jesus Christ who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen