

**SERMON FOR 2ND SUNDAY BEFORE LENT: 12 FEBRUARY 2023 AT STEEPLE
LANGFORD HC (based on Matt.6:25 - 34; & partly Gen.: 1:1 - 2:3 & Rom.8:18-25)
Reprioritising our lives**

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

Our readings today start with Genesis - God creating the world, the weather, and everything needed to sustain it; plants and creatures existing in harmony alongside the human beings who were made in God's likeness, sharing his attributes. That reading ends with a picture of a perfect world. But we know that subsequently, we lost many of those attributes that God had given us, damaging our relationship with him as we forged our own path to disharmony and division. We thought we could manage alone. But Paul, in his letter to the Romans, is clear that we can't. He talks of the "sufferings of this present time" and creation's "bondage to decay" - a description of a world not unlike ours today; a world and its people waiting in hope for eventual redemption. But how should we live while we wait?

Our Gospel reading suggests that we might reprioritise our needs. We find ourselves still on the Mount with Jesus, who is delivering some pretty difficult messages. If we take the passage at face value, Jesus is asking – no, not asking, telling – us not to worry about our lives, about finding sufficient to eat, drink and wear. Of course, real life for most isn't like that. Yet if we take Jesus literally, we would not have to work for a living, because like the birds and flowers, we would find everything we need around us, provided by God. How does that fit with the homelessness we see on our streets? With the TV images of refugees across the world struggling to keep sheltered and fed? There has to be a different interpretation. Even taking account of the cultural differences between the 1st century and now, surely we aren't being called to simply give up our responsibilities and do nothing to help ourselves?

The thing about the Bible is that it requires us to think, to look beyond the apparent. In doing so, we become more active readers, finding ourselves intrigued and absorbed as we explore hidden depths. Setting the passage from Matthew within its context, we remember that Jesus did in fact ask his closest disciples to give up their livelihoods and families to follow him. Furthermore, four chapters hence, Jesus will be sending those same disciples off on their mission to the "lost sheep of Israel", accepting hospitality wherever they can find it. So, Jesus' words would have been aimed at them, his friends who have devoted their whole lives to follow him, literally, on the road and away from the lives they

knew. They would need all the comfort he could give.

But what about us here today? Is all this talk of trusting God to provide for us, without our lifting a finger, hyperbole or 'mission impossible'? Does he really expect us to do nothing about looking after ourselves? That seems highly unlikely, so I am inclined to read the passage as an exhortation to refocus our lives. But what exactly can we, in the 21st century, take from text that, on the surface, seems to suggest we should return to a somewhat primitive way of life?

"Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?" - that is the key sentence, for me, closely followed by "your Father in heaven knows you need all these things". We are not being told to go without, but to "strive first for the Kingdom of God". That is, first before all the other things we have to do in life. Although in Jesus' day resources would for most have been sufficient to cover basic needs, there was also poverty and deprivation, a divide between the haves and the have-nots. Indeed, 1st century life among the rich would have included social ladder-climbing, profiteering, investment and money-lending, aspects of life and the economy with which we are equally familiar today. Jesus aims his attack at those who focus so hard on wealth acquisition that there is no room left for God. Nowadays, for the western world at least, resources usually far exceed our essential needs. And the more we have, the more we convince ourselves we need, with the help of advertising and year-round shopping bargains, of course. Constant striving for more has the potential to dominate our lives, not only distracting our attention away from how God wants us to live, but impoverishing our spirit.

God and our spiritual needs are not to be neglected. As the verse immediately before today's passage reminds us: "You cannot serve God and wealth". The word 'serve' has to be pivotal in our understanding of this statement. Our service, our source of comfort and fulfilment – these have to be to and with God. If our concern for acquiring possessions and wealth means that we spend the bulk of our time and effort on those, we have misprioritised our lives. Trusting merely in possessions and money to help us feel more secure puts us in thrall to them. Once we believe they can satisfy our deepest needs and insecurities, we suddenly discover we can never have enough. Jesus invites us to consider an alternative – a relationship with God whose love for us and all creation is infinite. His kingdom is a realm of abundance, where not worrying actually becomes an option. And with our concerns about our own needs put into perspective, perhaps we can turn to those in real need. For society's focus on ensuring that

we as individuals are doing very nicely, thank you, means we risk robbing others of justice and their fair share. As our first reading suggests, God's creation is for us all to share, humankind and animals alike - it feels like we're a long way from that utopian image.

So, are we still thinking 'mission impossible'? There will always be the haves and the have-nots, but what if more of the former shared with the latter? God gave humankind dominion over the world and its contents - we have an obligation to care for each other and our planet. It is through us, through our own compassion, that God will provide - but, although the buck and responsibility stops with us, we have God to guide us. Among the economic divisions and problems of 21st century life, it is a mission worth going for.

In the name of Christ, amen.