



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Thanksgiving Sunday – October 10, 2021

Scripture Passages: Joel 2.21-27; Matthew 6:25-33

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

We have so much to be thankful to God for today; not least for a whole day set aside to offer thanks and count our blessings.

Whether it originated with Indigenous People's thanksgiving to the Great Spirit for the harvest or with the earliest Quebec settlers and the Order of Good Cheer, we are giving thanks to God for something – bounty, deliverance, survival, gifts. And this is as true today – given all that we have gone through in the last 18 months as it was almost 400 years ago. We are thankful to God. This is clearly the case despite the resistance or forgetfulness of our culture which would like to say, "My strength and the power of my own hands have created this good life."

But we also have something closely connected to thankfulness to think about today because the Gospel talks about – worry! Interesting that we have thanks combined with worry in our readings today. You might think it an odd pairing but there is a very contemporary connection.

Jesus, in the role of the charismatic teacher he is, speaks to his disciples away from the crowds up on a mountain. He shares with them the ways of kingdom living. He tells them many things, for instance: that 'where their treasure is, their heart is there also'; he tells them that they shouldn't pray like the hypocrites and he gives them the gift of the Lord's prayer.

And then, Jesus says something else, something profound "don't worry." Don't worry about what you will wear, or eat, or how you will live. These are God's concerns not ours. Our concern is to seek the kingdom of God with all our energy, not just the energy that's left over after we've worried about all those other things.

All well and good you might feel. But apart from the normal things to worry about like rent and mortgages to pay, children to feed and clothe, work to be attended to and a community to belong to. There's family to negotiate and care for; there are friends to be balanced. All true. But on top of that, we have taken on the real worry of a scary world in recent times – pandemic, racism and sexism have raised their ugly systemic heads in intense ways, political unrest in the form of nationalism and extremism and other things too that you can no doubt add. And perhaps some of those things were unthought of in Jesus' day.

But let's not miss the deep point here – because the issue for Jesus, when he talks about worry, is what or who - rules our priorities in life.

He sees worry as the thing that dislodges the priority of seeking the kingdom from its rightful place and in turn puts the pursuit of wealth – and all the things that wealth can buy - in its place. He sets the self-serving pursuit of money, of gain and acquisition, on a par with religious devotion as something that can be all-encompassing. Jesus has very astutely defined the problem.

And this is important: He's said that the pursuit of worldly things is not in and of itself about acquisition, but it's about trying to assuage our anxiety, it's about trying to fill up our emptiness, our worry with things.

You see, this is a very subtle point. Jesus isn't saying that wealth or things are necessarily bad in themselves. After all he does say, your heavenly Father knows that you need things to live. But what he's saying is that it's what we attach to things that makes them unhealthy.

We attribute to things and to money - satisfaction, and fulfillment, and security, and love and commitment.

And there's the rub. Because things cannot deliver on those emotions or values. Things may be satisfying on one level to own and collect, but ultimately they are ephemeral and fleeting.

They decay, they go out of fashion, they become insufficient for the emotional weight we attach to them very, very quickly. How often have you wanted something desperately only to find that once you've achieved it, it no longer has the power to delight or satisfy you. So you have to move on to something else,... and so the cycle goes. It's eternally unsatisfying.

And what Jesus is saying is that when the priority in our lives is not working for the kingdom, but instead working for the bank balance as the emotional substitute for the fulfillment we truly want, then we have a problem. Because we can never fill our anxiety, our worry or our loneliness with these things.

This is a little hard to think about given all those competing priorities I spoke about a few moments ago.

Because it's an idea that's in conflict with the world we live in. The challenge to seek God's kingdom flies directly in the face of the continuing public discourse in much of what bombards us in the media, namely that our priority should be to live by greed and accumulate more - always more.

The challenge in the Gospel today is to engage with a different priority – God's priority and to seek the kingdom first and trust that our needs will then be fulfilled.

If this message makes you uncomfortable, well, it's meant to. Makes me uncomfortable too. There's lots to think about here. You see, I am confronted by the truth that I am a worrier. I wish I wasn't. It's such a waste of time. I imagine that if I added up all the minutes and half hours that I have expended on worry that the total amount of time would not be edifying. Someone once said "Worrying is like a rocking chair, it gives you something to do, but it gets you nowhere." I come by it honestly though, I come from a long line of worriers.

Oh the drama of it! It can be very gratifying to worry. You know what I mean. And when I have someone to worry with, well that just doubles the drama. And that's unhealthy. Because it keeps me from being present. It's a convenient sidebar that diverts attention and effort away from kingdom things.

And it very effectively keeps me from something else too – from a sense of gratitude, from thanking God – from living in thankfulness. If you're stuck in that cycle of worry, you forget to look up and be thankful for all the gifts of this life. And that's not helpful – not to God nor to ourselves. Worry prevents us from Thanking. Worry convinces us that the source of all gifts is ourselves; that who we have to thank or blame is only ourselves.

And the words that jolt me back to a right understanding of God's sovereignty in all things? They are: "Have you prayed about it?" Works like a charm every time.

Because what they do is remind me that God is the source of goodness and love and all the many gifts of this life.

I'm not unique in this. This is a theme that we encounter over and over again in the whole of scripture – the prophets remind the people of Israel that it was not of themselves they succeeded, but because God is sovereign – the Lord intervened and gifted them with what was necessary to do so in every situation. Their history is one of an enslaved people improbably achieving freedom, working through their relationship with God – failing, succeeding, and failing and succeeding again.

Through natural disaster – which the prophet Joel talks about this morning – through invasion and war, through internal strife and a long period of exile. Through worry about all of the above. The stories of Abraham and Sarah and

Joseph and his brothers and all the others show us the improbability of human success given their circumstances and personal foibles, but how, with God's gifts and help, they did succeed. And then, how in the person of Jesus, the Father has sent his most obvious help – his most obvious sign of hope and compassion and love to his people. Over and over God has led his people – has provided for his people. Over and over God has transcended our worries and shown us that he's got us, with love too deep for us to comprehend, with compassion and care for our needs. God's got us in good times and in bad. God's got us in the midst of all those scary things we worry about.

It's good to review the history of God's people – our people - once in a while. Helps to mitigate our propensity to worry. You see, none of it could have been predicted. And the fact is, our worries are so small in comparison with the great gifts that God has given us.

And that leads us to another close equation between God and his people, between Giver and receiver: we are to take the gift, give thanks and praise, but also pass the gift on.

What have we received? Loving family and community? Christian formation? Friendship? Help when we needed it most? Stability, belonging, compassion, deliverance, survival? All gifts from the Lord – every single one. And we don't keep these gifts. It's not for Christians just to accumulate blessings. No, we give them away again. We give them to everyone who comes to our door, everyone who joins the community of the church – whether online or in person. We give those gifts to all God's people.

Here's the thing – if we acknowledge that these things are gifts from God – then that whole 'pay it forward thing' becomes a whole lot easier. It's easier to give of our gifts, if we realize that they are gifts. I mean everything from kindness and care to money – all these are gifts.

We hold them a little more lightly then – if we don't seek to control these things quite so closely - the worry subsides. You see the point is that there is a partnership at work here. God gives, trusting and knowing that we, seeking the kingdom, will respond with souls of generosity and will pay those gifts forward.

That's it. It's simple - but not easy. It's a lot to think about today of all days on Thanks – giving day: a day for taking up the responsibility of those gifts. A day for answering the question, “where do I need to pay it forward in this community – this parish – this diocese – this church - gathered around the gospel?”

Happy Thanksgiving – a true thanks-giving to the God from whom all blessings flow – who gives so that we might be generous – who gives so that we might pass on that love and those gifts in his name.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.