

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

May 25, 2008

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In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, we've changed into green and we'll see green for a long time – up until November 30th, in fact. It marks “Ordinary Time” in the Church calendar, but there really is nothing ordinary about it. It's the time of year that we forget the theologizing and go “hands on”. We will follow Jesus in his ministry and hear his words and watch his actions. This is how we humans learn the basics of life – and it is how we learn to follow Jesus. The theme for the next six months is discipleship.

Today's lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures is from Second Isaiah and was written during the Babylonian Captivity. The Jews are still held captive in Babylon but their captors have either just been or are about to be themselves conquered by the Syrians. The prophet Isaiah, speaking for God, announces to his people not only their impending release but God's promise of a safe journey and Jerusalem's future as a magnet for all the world. The people cannot believe this and cling to their old thinking that the Lord has forsaken and forgotten them. God replies that whatever we may think we are always as close to God as a tattoo – “See, I have inscribed you on the palm of my hands.”

Jesus picks up on our intimate relationship with God in today's Gospel lesson. It is part of the Sermon on the Mount – Jesus' first great teaching lecture. Jesus is on

a high hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee and a crowd is gathered to hear him. In today's lesson, Jesus opens with a statement about priorities. He says one cannot serve two masters because a slave will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. When I was an associate at a big law firm, I often worked for 4 or 5 partners at the same time. I can tell you there were moments when I despised them all! But here Jesus is not telling us not to have two masters; instead he is pointing out that it really isn't about the masters we may have but about us. It is about the truth that when push comes to shove each of us will ultimately have a single priority. Here, he posits the ultimate choice is between God or the things of this world – the preoccupation with wealth or other distractions or compulsions of life.

The examples he gives about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field are probably familiar to all of us. The language is majestic and the images are beautiful, but if you are like me, there is a part of me that says, "Yes, it is beautiful, but is it true?" I mean let's get real. We are in a war that has gone on for longer than our participation in WWII, that has cost us 4,000 dead and 30,000 wounded and untold billions of dollars with no end in sight and no one seems to think or worry about it unless we have loved ones there. If that isn't enough, gas is already over \$4.30 a gallon here, foreclosures and bankruptcies are up, unemployment increases in all income groups and food prices are skyrocketing. And if **that** isn't enough, we can start in on the natural disasters and terrorist violence that seems always to be in the headlines. Believe me, this is not a good year to be preaching on the birds of the air or the lilies of the fields!

But let's face it, life was probably far more insecure and violent and unjust in Jesus' times than in ours. Jesus' examples call us to look beyond the surface, to look beyond ourselves. First, these examples call us out of our heads and away from our preoccupations and point us towards simplicity – towards seeing the beauty in ordinary daily things. If we can allow ourselves to be drawn into their outer beauty, then their inner beauty will emerge. If we can get out of the way, the inner beauty of Creation and life emerges. We start to see the beauty of relationship and interdependence. The clouds water the soil, the soil feeds the trees and shrubs which feed the birds who carry and distribute new seeds. Perhaps we can start to see ourselves as part of this ongoing cycle of life and we can start to see how we are connected with it all and as close to God as a tattoo.

Jesus isn't telling us not to toil and strive. Lord knows how hard he and his listeners had to struggle each day for survival. He is saying that we should do so with confidence that God cares and is with us and not with undo anxiety. It is when we forget God's love for Creation and our part in it, that anxiety becomes unbearable.

I read recently online at the Lead at www.episcopalcafe.org, a wonderful website of the Diocese of Washington, D.C., about how this lesson was learned by a scholar named Roberta Bondi. Her area of study was the Christian desert fathers and mothers. These were Christians who felt the world was corrupting the church when it became the established religion of the Roman Empire and who fled to the desert of Egypt in the 4th and 5th centuries to find God through prayer. They found in that bleak desert a God that was far more understanding and compassionate than human beings ever are towards each other or themselves. They were Christianity's first mystics and

psychotherapists rolled into one and their perceptive and earthy observations changed Prof. Bondi's way of thinking about religio and prayer.

She held both religion and prayer at a safe academic distance until a crisis of confidence occurred early in her marriage to her husband, Richard. One evening, as was often the case, he was late coming home and she went to a dark place of anxiety and fear. She described her first experience with contemplative prayer in an interview as follows:

Prof. Bondi: I was sitting there on the couch and all of a sudden the Abbas from the ancient desert started saying to me, "Roberta, Roberta, we have something to say to you," and I said, "Shut up and leave me alone. I'm worrying." And they said, "Oh, oh, no. Come on now. Come on. Listen." "Shh, shh, I'm worrying. Leave me alone." And finally I said, "All right. All right. What do you have to say?" And they said to me, "Well, now, you know that the main thing we're doing out here in the desert is prayer, and you have spent a lot of time studying us and working on us, and you might consider whether this might be something for you." And I said to them, "Oh, come on now. Look, I am a rational, reasonable woman, and I'm an academic, and this is, what you're suggesting, just is not really for me." And the answer to that was, "Ho, ho, ho, you might also consider as part of this that you have put Richard into the place of God for you. You know how we say that no one or no thing can fill that hole in your life except God, that your identity rests only in God and that all other loves come out of that, and that no human being can ever fill that. Of course you feel the way you do." So I was very embarrassed, because I knew, of course, instantly that they were right.

I think this may be what Jesus is getting at. Striving and worry that leave God out of the equation become misdirected and turn into obsessive preoccupation. This can blind us to the opportunities and new paths that apparent hardship may bring and, at worst, lead to a paralyzing fear that prevents us from taking any action at all.

The lesson Jesus draws from these images is not to strive but to strive as God would have us strive – for the Kingdom of God and its justice and right relationships – and then all that we need will be given to us. Misdirected anxiety only leads to injustice and fear and that only leads to further worries. When we strive in faith and trust for a world as God would have it be, things work out better for everyone.

Amen.