

8th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Isaiah 49:14-15 / Matthew 6:24-34)
02.03.2014

If Isaiah spoke the words he was given to speak in the section from his prophecy we read this morning, it is because at that particular time the people of Judah felt that God had forgotten, abandoned and forsaken them.

Everything seemed to be stacked up against them.

It seemed as if their godly acts, their trying to do good, was all for nothing.

It appeared as if the faith and hope they placed in God was in vain.

I wonder if we have never felt like that.

I know I have heard many people ask the question: *why?*

Why should things be proving so difficult for me?

After all, I am trying my best.

Why is it that my family is having such a rough time?

Why is it that things are as they are in my community of life?

After all, we are striving to please God by doing His will ... and yet troubles and difficulties assail us.

Why is it that all sorts of trials are piling up and seem to be set against us?

Why?

In the verses which immediately preceded those we heard in this morning's very short first reading, Isaiah assured the people that what God wants for and offers to those who feel downtrodden is their well-being.

To those who are in emotional turmoil and spiritual desolation, to those who are in bondage and suffering from depression, to those who feel only inner emptiness and as if they stand before a stark void, to those who are traversing life with a sense of aimlessness and pointlessness, through His prophet, Isaiah, the Lord promises fulfilment and He offers guidance in the way of life.

All this to say that even when – indeed, especially, when – we feel battered and bruised, crushed and broken by life's difficulties, when we feel ourselves to be tossed and turned, cast aside and forgotten about, through Isaiah's prophecy, God offers us a message of comfort
This morning, He speaks a word of life to us; He offers us a word of hope.

The message we are called to hear and trust in is that God will never abandon us.

If the Lord seems to be far removed from where we are at right now, what we are called to believe is that, in spite of present appearances, God is, in fact, close at hand.

What we are called to believe and trust in is what St Augustine teaches when he reminds us that *God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.*

The prophet's teaching is that the Lord is always somehow working out His plan for us ... and His plan is always for our good.

The writings of the apostles Paul and James (we heard James in the past week) make the same point strongly.

And so I hear the call addressed to us today as fundamentally a call not to lose heart. I hear it as a call to exercise confident trust.

I recognise that while this is easy to say, it may not be so easy to live.

It is hard for us to trust day after day, living one day at a time.

We are so tempted to run ahead of ourselves and carry concerns for tomorrow in our hearts.

When we run ahead of ourselves we only add to our worries, fearing *what if*.

Or again, when we run ahead of ourselves, we may be tempted to slip into wishful thinking and say *if only*.

Neither of these attitudes is good for us.

Both distract us from reality. Both distract us from the here and now of life.

They take us away from where God is to be found right now: with us, within us.

He is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

With worry we distract ourselves from ourselves.

Note what we sometimes say of a person who is overcome with worry. We say that *he or she is beside themselves, out of themselves*.

Beside our self, out of our self ... this is not where we are meant to be in life.

We are meant to be with our self!

I think it is important for us to recognise that each day brings with it concerns that we simply have to deal with. Each day we are confronted with things that simply cannot be avoided or changed.

Fair enough, the present and future may hold many challenges within them, but what will our excessive worrying about these things do for us?

Nothing positive!

Nothing ... except diminish our strength and leave us feeling limp, overcome with dread and fear.

The call of the Scriptures is to trust and to draw strength from our confidence in God.

Today's gospel passage comes in at this point with its words of comfort (*do not worry, do not be anxious*), but it also poses its own set of challenges to us as well.

When we think of it, we may conclude that today's gospel passage actually asks a bit much of us.

What if we were to satisfy ourselves with the thought that like the lilies in the field we are not worry about how to dress ourselves?

I remember one French Jesuit once saying the lilies of the field might well be dressed better than Solomon, but he knew that if he walked around the streets of Paris content to be as exposed as a lily in a field he would soon be arrested for indecent exposure and, in the meantime, if it were a winter's day, he would feel uncomfortably cold.

Likewise, he added, if people were not to think of labouring to do what is needed to produce crops we would soon all die from hunger.

Mockingly, he threw out the challenge to his listeners: *Don't think about the future, just trust ... and see how far that brings you!*

His point is that we must be careful not to be too literal in our reading of the gospel text we hear today.

While we must not be too literal in our reading of the text, we must nonetheless (indeed, all the more) pay attention to some key words used in it.

Among these key words we find the words *worry, anxious, future (tomorrow)*.

Do not worry, be not anxious about the future.

We are *not to worry*/we are *not to be anxious* about the *future*.

That does not mean that we are to deny the probability of the future coming ... and/or ignore the fact that tomorrow may well hold challenges for us.

What it means is that we are to avoid losing our peace as we think of the future.

Worry/anxiety/fear won't add to our lives ... They will detract from our lives.

The point being made is that we are to avoid letting our imagination run riot. We are to avoid fearing with dread that tomorrow we will be abandoned, left to fend for ourselves alone.

What we are to avoid is forgetting that we are God's people and that He cares for us.

The gospel's point is that our experience of God's care up until this point and in the here and now should prepare us to face the future with confidence and trust ... and, even more than that, with hope.

Another thing flagged up for us in Jesus' teaching today is that we should avoid slavery to what we have ... what we possess.

How easily we call allow our possessions to possess us!

Possessions can either be perceived as offering us a healthy security or they can become a cause of imprisonment.

When this happens a gift can become a curse.

So often we confuse security with imprisonment.

When we do this we sacrifice a fundamental gift that God offers us as His chosen people: the gift of freedom.

Today's gospel reminds us that as Christians we are called to be free.

Freedom is a gift that is not given once and for all.

It is something we have to open ourselves to receive day after day.

It is day after day that we have to strive to be/to become more and more *free men and women who live under grace* (to quote St Augustine).

The words of the prophet Jeremiah come to mind at this point.

Jeremiah addressed God's people saying: *It is only the Lord's mercies that have kept us from complete destruction. Great in His faithfulness; His loving kindness begins afresh each day.*

Lamentations 3:22-13.

Yes, God's *loving kindness begins afresh each day.*

I believe that this is precisely the point Jesus makes in today's gospel passage. This is what He wants us to understand.

What Jesus is saying to us does not amount to advocating a textile-free life-style and/or going without food and drink, but rather remembering how God's goodness and mercy are renewed for us with the dawn of each new day.

It is when we remember that *God's mercies are renewed afresh each day* that we well and truly begin to live as St Augustine tells us we should live: *as men and women who are free under grace.*

Since God's grace comes to us (like the manna) in daily doses, that is the best way to approach life: one day at a time!

The song writer got it right in the refrain: *One day at a time, dear Jesus, that's all I'm asking of you.*

One day at a time ... That is to only way to live truly, freely, without anxiety and fear: *one day at a time!*

A day can be both a very short time and a very long time.

For some of us one day is already a long time span in which to think.

Ask anyone struggling with an addiction or suffering from acute pain! They wonder how they will ever get through a whole day!

What Jesus is saying to us this morning amounts to this.

Each one of you should ask yourself at each and every turning of life: *Am I accepting this present moment, or am I distracted and copping out, either by trying to escape into the future or dwell on the past?*

I believe we begin to live real life when we discover that in each and every day, each and every circumstance, God is to be found.

He is everywhere present.

He is there with us in the good moments we traverse and He is there when we go through hell.

(Remember that He descended into hell for us! We will sing those words in the Creed.)

In each and every day, each and every circumstance, we are called to search for God and find Him. We are called to recognise that He is always with us, even when (as is often the case) we are not with ourselves.

If, for each day, there is something to find joy in, there is also strength promised for the troubles of that same day.

The psalmist wrote a line which we recall each Sunday morning at Lauds here at the monastery in the celebration of our Morning Prayer commemorating Christ's resurrection.

The line goes: *This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!*

If only we approached each and every day with that frame of mind and disposition of heart (seeing it as God's day to be rejoiced in), then we would know joy and peace, freedom and trust.

May we allow ourselves to be challenged and encouraged by the word of God heard this morning: His word which reminds us that He is with us always!

The message to take away from this Eucharist is that we will find joy and strength, sanity and peace, health and well-being (the things we long for most) to the extent that we accept the reality of each and every day ... and strive to live it, really, authentically, without avoidance, without pretence!