

Sermon

The Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity, 2016

Good Shepherd, Charlestown; Trinity Anglican Church, White River Junction, Vermont

Let us Pray: O God, our refuge and strength, who art the author of all godliness; Be ready, we beseech thee, to hear the devout prayers of thy Church; and grant that those things which we ask faithfully we may obtain effectually; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“Consider the lilies of the field...” What a wonderful phrase. What a brilliant translation. It is not quite a metaphor, but this phrase invites our contemplation; it invites us to think about one tiny part of God's creation; it invites us to consider our own place in God's creation. In this one phrase, we might will imagine Jesus pointing to the fields and saying to us all: “Consider this part of my creation, then consider yourselves.” Then consider yourselves.

Our gospel reading for today is very full; it is full of images; it is full of impressions. Some of appears a bit like a slideshow, one that gives us a series of quick photographs. We see lilies; we see Solomon in his glory; we see grass being thrown into ovens; we see the birds of heave. But some part of this passage refer to our emotions, our anxieties, our worries. There is an emotional map to this passage, where Jesus seeks to relieve us of our worries. God in Christ points to those things we may worry about. He also tells us that “no man can serve two masters.” This phrase makes us ask ourselves who or what it is that rules our lives. Finally, after all this rush of imagery, after all his challenging words, Jesus get to the major point: “seek ye first his kingdom.” Seek ye first his kingdom.

This entire gospel passage is comprised of the words of Jesus. It

is a monologue attributed to Jesus himself. Every word of it. Yes, the passage was originally written in Greek. And Jesus spoke Aramaic. And, yes, there are a variety of translations. The New English Bible translates the lilies passage in this way: “consider how the lilies grow in the field.” Perhaps a more literal translation. But I prefer the King James translation: “consider the lilies of the field.” More poetic. The King James translation actually requires us to look at those lilies, to consider their essence, their very being. What are they. And how do they serve God's creation. They serve by simply being what they are. They serve by being the lilies of the field. Consider that. Then consider yourselves.

Who are we? Why were we created? Jesus does not ask this question directly – at least in this passage. But it is certainly implied; it is certainly there. Jesus tells us about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. He tells us what they do. He tells us that God loves them. Who are we, then, in the eyes of God?

A few days ago, I received an email from a parishioner in one of our parishes. “Bishop Marsh,” my correspondent wrote, “our priest often mentions that we live in a 'broken' world. Can you help me understand what this means?” I thought about this email message for a good long time. I wondered why this correspondent didn't ask her parish priest. Then I began to wonder how often the priest in question was mentioning our “broken world.” Perhaps a friendly call might be necessary.

But I began with some of the basics. God has created the world out of love. He loves all of creation. God has, as we learn in Genesis,

pronounced it “good.” He has created us to know and love him. He has pronounced our creation good as well. But God has endowed us with a soul and with free will. I went on to explain that it is our choice; do we choose God or do we choose evil? It is in that ability to choose that evil enters the world. And when evil enters the world, the perfection given in creation is distorted. God does not cause this distortion, but He does permit it; he allows evil. He allows the crucifixion, which transformed evil. The Gospels teach us that Jesus came into the world to restore creation and to point to the kingdom yet to be.

The brilliance of this passage from St. Matthew's gospel shows us Jesus doing just that: he points out the beauty of creation, he acknowledges the imperfections that exist in us and points to the kingdom, inviting us, urging us, with all the love his persuasive words can provide, to join him there.

I never heard back from my correspondent, so perhaps my words were of some value to her on her journey.

So where, then, do we seek the kingdom of God? We seek it here. Right now. In this very place. And when we leave here, we are to seek it there. Everywhere we go. Sometimes, we may be surprised by where we seek - and find - God's kingdom. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was condemned to death in a concentration camp during World War II was asked: “where do we find God”? And he replied: “Right here.”

You will likely all read the following story, as I have written it

down and it will be printed in the next edition of the Northeast Anglican. And I have shared the story with some of you already. As you all know, Ljuba and I traveled to Spain and Portugal last Summer. I hope you're not too tired hearing about that trip. Yes, we visited some very holy sights like Fatima and Santiago de Compostela. But the kingdom of God is often where we least expect it. One morning, while we sailed on the Douro River, I excused myself early from breakfast, saying to our new friends that I needed to say the daily office. Well, that prompted several questions: what's the daily office? And, would you like an audience? I answered the questions and hurried off to say the required prayers before the bus left for Salamanca. Later that day, Ljuba and I, along with several new friends we had made on the trip, toured the ancient Spanish city, visited the famous cathedrals and saw one of the oldest universities in Europe.

But word about this “daily office” practice got around. And, in the often surprising way that God works, the tiny living room of our cabin was, on the following day, filled with a group of people eager to hear the Word of God. There was even one Presbyterian who wasn't sure why there was a need for bishops. What are they for, anyway? You can read the complete story in next month's edition of The northeast Anglican.

In the meantime, consider the lilies. Consider why we were created. And let us help each other seek first the kingdom of God.

Amen.