

Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Look at the birds in the sky; they neither sow nor reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more important than they...? But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides.”
Matthew 6, 24-34



Today's readings call us to look at the anxieties we can create for ourselves when we lose a healthy balance in our lives and become obsessed with some person, activity or thing. We've all probably encountered people who have become obsessed with something or other, to the exclusion of all else. All their attention is given to jogging or their diet or playing gaming machines or acquiring the latest electronic gadgetry. If we're honest with ourselves, we can probably all admit to being obsessed with something or other at some stage in our lives. Today's readings give us opportunity to pause and reflect on what it is that we have set our heart on and to shift our focus to the things of God. When that happens, Matthew reminds us, everything else will fall into place.

The second reading from Corinthians informs us very directly that, as Christians, we have a responsibility to be "servants of Christ and administrators of the mysteries of God. And the first requirement of an administrator is that he prove trustworthy." (1 Corinthians 4, 1-2) What on earth are we to make of that? I suggest it's something like being public servants, doing our best to ensure that the message of the Gospel is spread around, as much by what we do as by what we say. And one of the most important "mysteries of God" that we have a responsibility to proclaim is contained in the first reading from Isaiah and then expressed in different language in the gospel reading. Isaiah tells us of the depth of God's love for each of us: "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even if she should forget, I will never forget you. See, upon the palms of my hands I have written your name;" (Isaiah 49, 15-16) And the gospel reading from Matthew repeats the message from Isaiah, assuring of how precious we are to God: "Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns: yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not much more important than they?...Learn a lesson from the way the wild-flowers grow. They do not work; they do not spin. Yet I assure you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was arrayed like one of these. If God can clothe in such splendour the grass of the field, which blooms today and is thrown on the fire tomorrow, will he not provide much more for you, O weak in faith?" (Matthew 6, 28-30) Not a bad message to proclaim, don't you agree? And Matthew even advises that one of the clearest ways to proclaim such a message is to stop getting anxious about accumulating wealth and possessions or worrying about the gear we wear, and to trust in the goodness of a God who loved us into life and who can't stop loving us despite our best efforts to lock that God out.

There's a very clear message here for those of us who, in practice, subscribe to the view that what we have makes us worthwhile or even important. There are some of us who seem to believe that a string of university degrees will put us on top of the pile. Others think a yacht or a motor cruiser or a BMW or an iPad will do the trick. And then there are those (mainly the younger generation) who seek to get their importance from the latest Nike shoes or the Calvin Klein label that protrudes above the belt-line of their trousers.

Today's readings call us to hold our lives and possessions and qualifications and reputations with a light grasp, and not to be afraid of letting go of our false securities. Hanging on tightly all too often deprives us of life's most fulfilling and enriching experiences. We can become so absorbed with the pursuit of wealth or prestige or power or personal goals that we miss the sense of purpose that God's presence gives to our living; we fail to recognize and appreciate the richness of God's love reflected in the love of those people who, we say, are most important to us.

There's nothing like a story to drive home a message to us. The following one, if my memory serves me correctly, is from a short story by Tolstoy and makes the point that the securities we can hold on to are not necessarily expensive ones:

Once upon a time, a king held a grand ball to mark the anniversary of his coronation. Everyone in the kingdom received an invitation. However, all those attending were requested to come in formal attire.

A poor apprentice carpenter named Peter desperately wanted to go to the ball, but he just couldn't afford the required clothes. On the afternoon before the ball, he decided to walk by the palace gates just to see the preparations that were going on. As he stood gazing through the gates, he heard a voice from behind: "Why the long face, young man?"

Startled, Peter turned to face his questioner. "What?" he stammered.

"Why are you standing here with such a the long face? You should be home getting ready for the ball." Peter couldn't believe it. It was the king himself who was talking to him, a mere common carpenter.

"I'm sorry, your majesty. I would very much like to come to the ball, but I don't have the proper clothes to attend such a royal event."

"Why, that's no problem," said the king who immediately summoned his son and instructed him to find suitable clothes for Peter. The prince led the young man to a palace dressing room and selected a beautiful set of clothes for him.

"I think you'll be very happy with these," the prince remarked. "They are made of the best material and will not wear out quickly like your other clothes."

"Thank you so much," said Peter as he reached to collect his old clothes piled on the floor.

"Leave those," said the prince. "They're of no use to you now."

"But what if something happens to my new clothes?" Peter protested.

"Then you can come and see me again, and I'll give you something else to wear."

Peter thought for a moment, "No, Sir, I may need these clothes some day.

"As you wish, my friend," said the prince. "But hurry along, the ball will soon be starting. Go and enjoy every minute of it."

Peter rolled his old clothes into a bundle which he carried with him all during the ball. He would not part with it, and kept to the edges of the ballroom through the entire evening. He was not able to dance or join in any of the entire evening's festivities. When the servants came around with platters of food and drink, Peter could only sample a few of the delicacies because he had only one free hand. By the end of the evening, the whole gathering was filled with gratitude and delight at having spent such a wonderful evening as guests of the king. That is, all except for Peter who had spent the entire evening tightly holding his bundle of ragged clothes.

Jesus does not condemn wealth or possessions. He merely tells us to keep them in right perspective, using them to cooperate with God in the work of completing creation. Possessions and power and reputation become barriers when we create idols out of them. They prevent us from seeing how valuable we are in God's estimation.