

SERMON

The Bishop of Ripon, Rt Rev Dr Helen-Ann Hartley

Early on during lockdown, I went out for a run. Bathed in the first light of morning, I turned off the concrete path here in this village and headed along the riverside. My steps were cautious. Under my feet were tree roots, stones, bits of broken wood. It was so quiet. Not many cars on the road during those days of restricted movement.

As I ran, I caught a glimpse of something moving quickly out of the corner of my eye. I looked, and to my amazement I saw an otter cross the road and take up the path in front of me. My pace-setting companion soon gathered speed and after a few metres, slipped down the bank towards the river and disappeared out of sight. I remember quite vividly smiling; I had never seen an otter in the wild before. Nature getting on with its life around me, without (so it seemed) concern or hesitation.

Both of our readings set for harvest reference nature: its beauty and abundance. In doing this however, they place God firmly in the midst of it. God radiates life and life radiates God. The Israelites are told to remember God; this is part of the covenant relationship, an obligation and regard for all that has been generously given to them. We know that the story of Israel involved remembering and forgetting. That is part of our story too.

In Luke's Gospel we hear of the parable of the rich man who has everything but, in his isolation, and in his focus on his own profitability fails to remember his own place in relationship to God; he is (to evoke Luther's words) 'twisted into self.' This leads Jesus to remind his disciples of the dangers of holding on to possessions with words that ring down the ages:

'Do not worry about your life.'

Well ok Jesus, but really? A global pandemic, climate change, deadlines, work pressures, social media pressures, employment, my next meal, a safe place to live? How can I not worry?

It's bold to say it, but our Gospel strikes an optimistic tone; it certainly invites us to sit lightly to things that might weigh heavily on our minds. In order to figure out what this is about, it helps us to go behind the text and consider something of its background. Commentators on this passage reflect that the verses of our reading are helpfully understood as an example of Jewish Wisdom literature (and there's quite a lot of that in the Bible: Think of the book of Proverbs, in the Old Testament). Wisdom literature is literature that encourages us to look at the world as it really is; to remember the bits we might forget about and see in ordinary consequences what we might describe as: 'the how much more?' argument. The lilies grow; how much more then will God enable each of us to grow?

At the heart of Jesus' message is a desire for us to push away our anxieties and move from the very opposite of fear to trust. Being a disciple hopefully means we have a desire to commit to following Jesus, and we want to acknowledge this in the presence of God and with our worshipping community in witness to others.

That is powerful stuff; that is deep wisdom. C S Lewis once said: 'the next best thing to being wise oneself is to live in a circle of those who are'. We don't do this discipleship thing alone! Perhaps that's been one of the greatest challenges of recent months. A man I spoke with earlier this week told me that during lockdown he had loved being able to enjoy the peace of his surroundings at home, but he had also found the loneliness incredibly difficult at times. 'Do not worry about your life,' Jesus says. I still need a bit of convincing!

In a moment we'll hear a reflection from landscape painter David Stead who talks about what belonging means to him in the way he paints, the things he chooses to focus on, the way the landscape of creation teaches us about our place in it. As you listen to David, allow yourself to find points of connection with your own surroundings, and in the things you see from day to day. What do you forget? What can you remember?

Ancient wisdom is earthed deep in the ground and manifested in the heavens. God's blessings (we pray) borne out through our creativity as human beings. On this day we think particularly of those who work the land, care for it, and tend to it. We have a part to play in that too; the Bible makes that very clear indeed. And it's not just the physicality of our earth, it's our physicality too - our neighbour, the faces we do not see or that we choose for whatever reason not to see. In God's kingdom, all should be welcome.

For a number of years, we lived in New Zealand, and I'm very conscious at the moment that as our days are beginning to shorten, the Southern Hemisphere is turning to Spring. There is something quite powerful I think in the knowledge that where we see darkness, others experience light. Where we can see no way ahead, others can. How can we share that knowledge, that perhaps is one of the key tasks of discipleship? I am charged with bringing God's light wherever I go. That is both a challenging and a beautiful thing. Worry sometimes, yes of course (we are human, after all), but trust and hope remain. Trust and hope that generates life, love and justice in our world in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

Amen.