

A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

*Sunday 16 February 2020*

*Sexagesima*

'Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.'

Whilst spending a month with the Delhi Brotherhood in India in 2018, I had the privilege of visiting their Mahila Panchayat. A women's council which provides a space for resolving challenges or disputes faced at home or in the local community, on this occasion a woman came to ask for help leaving an arranged marriage which had become abusive. One of the Brothers, who knew I was training to be a Priest, asked me to speak with the woman and to offer some words which might help her not to worry. I felt uneasy – I wasn't sure that I had learnt anything in training which would make the woman feel better, let alone help her. Still, I spoke with her with the help of a translator, as the Brother had requested, but as we left the Mahila Panchayat later on, I couldn't help but think that I had done nothing to ease her "worry". Another visitor, who was with me, reassured me that there was nothing I could have done and that the woman's fate wasn't really anything to do with me, yet in the months after I returned home from Delhi, the woman's pained facial expression stayed with me. Was it true that her fate had nothing to do with mine? Was I sure that there was nothing I could have done to ease her worry?

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When we talk about "worry", particularly in relation to today's Gospel reading, we often talk about the day-to-day worries that govern our own

lives. When we are young, we might be concerned with our body and physical appearance; and, as we age, our worries might turn to measures of success, involving money or status; and as we grow older still, we might begin to worry about death and what we have made of our lives and those whom we love. These are stereotypes, but they represent some of the worries and anxieties that the well-being industry tries to combat with its Headspace Apps, mindfulness, and emphasis on self-care. All of these things are important and shouldn't be undermined – they can help to temper very real fears, worry, or anxiety. Yet, whilst we are lucky to have access to these techniques in the West, they don't help the battered women from the slums close to the Mahila Panchayat and nor do they really solve any underlying anxiety. The answer to these problems, suggests today's Gospel Reading, comes by striving first for the Kingdom of God and so forgetting our own needs, desires, and worries.

Christ's understanding of the Kingdom of God, embodied through his ministry, which touched those society had deemed 'untouchable' on account of race, class and gender, has its origins in the creation narrative we heard in today's reading from Genesis. 'So, God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them.' The first account of God's creation is one of plurality and communion, in which all are created by God and known to be Good. In this story of creation, there is harmony in Eden because all co-exist with the eternal God, not taking more than they need, but simply being in perfect relationship with each other and with the Divine. In Eden, at the beginning of creation, as in heaven, there is no worry.

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Being made in the image of God means we are created to be in relationship, not just with those we love, but with strangers, with people on the other side of the planet whom we have never met. Inhabiting God's vision for creation means acknowledging that the fate of the woman in the Manchila Panchayat *was* and *is* my concern, and a concern for each of us here now. When we surrender our own worry in favour of embracing a patient attention for friend and stranger, we reflect the loving gaze of God through which each of us *were* and *are* created. Like the African concept of *ubuntu*, it reflects the 'I am because you are' relationship in which we were created and so most deeply desire. This innate longing is often reflected in the lives of children, who have not yet learned to behave differently, as an anthropologist discovered as he proposed a game to a group of children from an African tribe. After putting a basket full of fruit near a tree, he told the children that whoever got there first won the sweet fruits. When he told them to run, they all took the hands of each other, before running and enjoying their treats together. When he asked them why they had run like that, they said, *ubuntu*, how can one of us be happy if all the other ones are sad?' Daring to respond to a call to accept each person as brother or sister allows us to replace our worries with concern for each another, so that each of us, including the woman from the Manchila Panchayat, can reclaim dignity and become more human. 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.'

Attuning ourselves towards this call to communion will not, in itself, make us good. Sometimes people say, 'I don't need religion – I'm already a good person.' Of course, that's true. We are all *good* simply because God who is Absolute Good created us. So, in this sense, it doesn't matter what you choose to do with your life or how you choose to live it. Whether we look into the eyes of a nurse caring for our elderly relative in hospital, or into those of a young man or woman who has just been sentenced to life in

prison, as Christians, we can see and know that they are good. But the question of how much of their created goodness is made visible in them has everything to do with our own eyes, and the eyes of all those who look at the person spending their life caring for others or serving a life sentence in prison.

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Answering God’s call to affirm the goodness and humanity of ourselves and the woman in the Manchila Panchayat is redemptive. This change in perspective won’t necessarily take away our worries, for as long as we live outside of Eden, ‘tomorrow will bring worries of its own’. Yet it might prompt an internal shift which calls us to see ourselves in relation to others, including friends, strangers, and those society has deemed ‘untouchable’, so replacing a deeper existential anxiety and loneliness with a renewed sense of our common humanity and life together. In some ways, this shift in gaze away from our own worries isn’t so different from the shift in focus mindfulness suggests. Yet, unlike mindfulness, this call demands a radical change of heart and way of living our lives, which invites us to inhabit a collective identity with those around us, so making the communal image of God visible. ‘Do not worry about your life but strive first for the Kingdom of God.’ Worry, first, about each other, including the fate of the woman in the Manchila Panchayat. To do so might just be the greatest gift we can offer to the abused woman, to God, and to ourselves. ‘God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created *them*.’

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*Genesis 1.1 – 2.3; Matthew 6.25 – end*