

Sermon preached at St James's Piccadilly London
19 February 2017
The Revd Lindsay Meader
Second Sunday before Lent
Romans 8:18-25; Matthew 6:25-end



Get Your Act Together for Lent Sunday

Officially today's the Second Sunday before Lent, or in old money, Sexagesima Sunday. For others, who are looking back rather than forward, it's the 7th Sunday after Epiphany. But I have a different name for it, one you'll not find in any of the ecclesiastical tomes and calendars. For me today is *Get Your Act Together for Lent Sunday*. Lent begins in less than a fortnight, and so now is the optimum time to think seriously about how best to mark it this year. And I cannot underestimate the importance of marking Lent well – it can be an incredibly rich and fruitful time in which even a small amount of effort and commitment brings great rewards.

Here in the middle of a busy noisy city, where in the space of a few yards we are confronted with wealth and poverty, with excess and hardship in equal measure, Lent extends an invitation to press the pause button, to not just take, but importantly make time to focus on what really matters. It can be a season of uncovering deeper truths and surprises, when we learn that in turning in, our gaze reaches out. A helpful key to marking Lent well is the word we find at the heart of our Gospel passage today – *consider*, meaning to examine closely. In Lent we are invited to contemplate and consider – to slow down and examine closely our lives, our world and our relationship with God – and then to act according to what we have learned and discovered.

I had a small epiphany on this theme on my way here today. As I was getting off the tube and walking up through the station, a young girl was complaining to her mum about the repetitive warning to "Mind the Gap". Her mum sensibly pointed out that at least no

one could say they hadn't been warned. To which the little girl replied, "Yes, but it must really get on your nerves." And I heard, very distinctly, the London voice in my head reply, "Nope. You just filter it out." And suddenly I found myself wondering, what else do I filter out? How many other voices, faces, sights and situations do I filter out on a daily basis without even a second thought because they're either annoying or inconvenient or make me feel uncomfortable? It's certainly something worth considering. I encourage you to do the same. If considering is how we make ourselves aware of things we're previously hidden, ignored or overlooked, then showing consideration show be how we act to remedy this.

Each year as I approach Lent, I find myself experiencing both excitement and trepidation; excitement because I know that if I do Lent well, it will be a time and growth and discovery, and trepidation because I know that if I do Lent well, it will make demands, challenge and provoke me, take me outside of my comfort zone and ultimately, change me.

Consider the lilies, Jesus tells the disciples. It's a beautiful and pastoral image, and we can well imagine the lilies growing in the Galilean countryside. Closer to home we think perhaps of the crocuses emerging in our parks and green spaces, and of the buds already evident on our magnolia tree in the courtyard. In themselves they are a sign of God's love and goodness manifest in Creation. Only a few weeks ago, a number of our Sunday congregation gathered in our garden early one morning before the Eucharist to consider the birds of the air,

joining in the RSPB BirdWatch. But despite those soothing words of Christ, we know all too well, that even in the natural world, there is conflict. Last year many of our staff and market traders, myself included, got very excited when the two ducks who had taken up residence in our garden, in the middle of a busy trading afternoon, brought their entire brood of extremely cute and fluffy offspring for their first swimming lesson in our fountain. Sadly, within 24 hours, not a single duckling remained. God knows and provides for their needs, but nonetheless, nature is often red in tooth and claw.

As often, Jesus words' are beautiful but also realistic and point us to the deeper truths of our existence. God cares for all Creation and knows our needs even before we articulate them, but nonetheless, we are none of us exempt from hardship or suffering. We live in a world of beauty, but much of that beauty is fragile; each day has troubles of its own and our faith is not a get out of jail free card, far from it.

But this passage is every bit as much about economy as nature. Jesus uses the analogy of the flowers and birds, but is talking about our practical needs – for food, for clothing, for security. He is also speaking of God's economy of abundance. Just as the flowers and birds are clothed beautifully, so God's will for all God's children is abundance. Elsewhere Jesus tell us that is the reason he has come, that we may know 'life in all its fullness'. But we know there is a long way to go in achieving such balances. The poor were present in Jesus' day and are still present today. We are well aware that both at home and abroad, there are many for whom not just food and clothing, but shelter and clean water is a source of daily worry.

Jesus was well aware of this and indeed, his life and ministry was located predominantly amongst the poor and marginalised – the prostitutes, the lepers, the lame and the lowly; those for whom life was particularly difficult and challenging. He was especially present to such as these – he lived and

travelled and laughed and ate and wept among them. He called them his friends. His righteous anger was reserved for those who sought to deny abundance to others, to exploit and distort people's relationship with God; for those who sought to profit from those coming to the temple to fulfil their religious duties and devotions; those who used religion to claim power and control over other and those who used that power to denigrate and oppress.

The gospel Jesus embodies is one of liberation – to free us from the powers and principalities of this world. Worrying about a future we cannot control is, in the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, a form of "idolatry to give your fears and anxieties the power and authority to shape who you are and to drive your behaviour." Worry propels us into the past or the future and in doing so takes us out of the present moment and distances us from God. Anxiety cannot manufacture security or freedom, it can only serve to disconnect us from its source.

When we worry about materialism, we are focussed on the economy of scarcity, of not having sufficient. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is presenting us with a choice – love or money. As David Lose observes, "Love operates from a different "economy" than money. I mean, when our second child came along, I didn't divide my love for our first child between the two, I suddenly had more love, more than I could possibly have imagined before. No doubt you've noticed the same thing: how the more love you give away, the more you have ... Love – and especially God's love – cannot be counted, tracked or stockpiled. And when you live in this kind of relationship of love and trust, you've entered into the realm of *abundance* . . . God operates out of abundance. So in response to the crucifixion of God's Son, God does not, in fact, keep track, or look for payment, or hoard power with which to destroy the offenders; instead, God *resurrects* – which, when you think about it, is the *ultimate* act of abundance: creating something, once again, out of nothing,

drawing light from darkness, giving life to the dead.”

Jesus invites us to invest that energy that we would waste worrying about the present or the future to living and loving in the present, to making God’s kingdom a reality. That means recognising that life in abundance is God’s will for all God’s children. Seen, or even, considered, through this lens, poverty is not so much a lack of money but a lack of relationships, a lack of community, a lack of trust and dependency. Bringing in the kingdom means recognising that people matter more than money, possessions or status, it means living generous lives; not just considering, but showing consideration.

We are stewards of God’s creation – it’s all gift. The way we live our lives will impact on whether or not our brothers and sisters have enough to eat and clothes to wear. Ultimately, our hope is in God, but that must be lived out in interdependency and Who will I encounter - our responsibility to one another. We are part of God’s provision; we are part of God’s rescue plan, we are part of the way God shows consideration.

So how can we reflect this in the way we mark Lent? In your service sheets today you’ll find a copy of the different opportunities we are offering this Lent, which in addition, as you would expect, to liturgies, also includes Bible study session and film screenings. You will note that in all of these choices, conversation plays an important part. As Lucy rightly says of the Bible study, “The gospels were written in community. We hear them differently when we talk about them together.” In the same vein, when a number of us gather here each month to share in silent prayer, we note how often it is so much easier to pray in silence together than by ourselves.

Similarly, I believe Lent is lived out best when lived in community. Don’t get me wrong, prayer is vital in deepening our relationship with God, but it is in the living out of our lives in relation to others that we most fully play

our part in understanding and helping build God’s Kingdom.

When I read through our Lent leaflet, there’s lots of things I’m looking forward to. But there’s also one element which fills me with the shared sense of excitement and trepidation I mentioned earlier. That’s the 40acts Challenge. It’s been recommended by a couple of people here at St James’s who have undertaken it in previous years. This will be my first year doing the challenge. It’s run through social media, and involves a different act of generosity each day. My sense of trepidation comes from not knowing exactly what it is I’m letting myself in for. As each act of generosity is released each day – via Twitter, email, Facebook or a number of other social media, there’s no peaking ahead to see what’s coming up. By its very nature – acts of generosity – there are of course other people involved – those to whom we’ll be invited to be generous, so there’s another unknown. Who will I encounter? At what level? What might I share? No doubt some days that will be at a cost – not necessarily financial, but in other more important ways, we’ll be invited to give of ourselves in sharing.

If you’re starting to feel somewhat anxious at this prospect, then take heart that each day, there are three levels of challenge – one which takes only a couple of minutes and costs no more than a few pence at most, the second takes a little longer and no more than a couple of pounds and the third level is more challenging for those who really want to push themselves. It’s up to you which level you do on any day.

Part of the attraction for me is that it’s a daily challenge. For Jesus calls us to live in the present. This teaching to consider the lilies comes shortly after he has taught the disciples The Lord’s Prayer, with that request for *daily* bread – that dependence on God and God’s goodness and generosity one day at a time.

It is in and through the ability - or even the aspiration - to live in the present that we become more rooted in God, more rooted in God's kingdom and those with whom we live and work and worship. In this, we find not growing servitude, but increasing freedom, which Paul describes as "the freedom of the glory of the children of God".

To live a life free of worry is for many of us akin to that freedom and glory. Perhaps that is the most important goal any of us can strive for this Lent, to spend more time contemplating and acting and less time worrying. In seeking that path, we become co-creators, fellow disciples and the more we see and experience of God's goodness and provision on a daily basis, the more we discover the desire to share it with others; to work to alleviate the suffering of those who are down-trodden, abused or simply less fortunate. A great piece of advice I was given during a really tough time in my life was to find one thing each day to be grateful for. Once you start looking for signs of God's presence, it becomes infectious – and often involves the most unlikely faces and places.

It's something we see Jesus model himself. Look at how many times in the Gospels Jesus takes himself off to deserted wild places, mountains and hilltops to pray, to contemplate, to take time out with God. When Jesus tells us to look at the birds of the air and consider the lilies of the field, there's a very real sense he's telling us because that's what's worked for him when he's needed to take time out, to regroup, when he was anxious or worried. Each time, he returns energized or at least strengthened and certainly more focused to face even the most horrific of situations. Jesus makes it very clear that his God is our God too. This is what incarnation is all about – Christ comes to share every aspect of our humanity that we might share in his divinity – that we too can learn and practice both contemplation and acts of generosity, and in doing so, we too can be strengthened, comforted and even energized. Gradually we learn to live more in hope and expectation than worry

and fear. From the place of stillness, we find assurance of the kingdom still to come.

And so, on this *Get Your Act Together for Lent Sunday*, I hope like me, you will embrace both the excitement and the trepidation at the opportunity that lies ahead and make some kind of plan to begin on Ash Wednesday. I hope you might find a moment or two in which to consider, to ask yourself what do you need to stop filtering out and do something about? And, whether it's not something in our leaflet or something completely different, I hope you will consider venturing outside of your comfort zone and deeper into the love and generosity of God, one day at a time. Amen.