



St James's
Church
Piccadilly

Sunday, 12 February 2023
The Second Sunday before Lent
Romans 8.18-25; Gospel of Matthew 6:25-34
The Rev'd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease
'The hope of which we are made'

May I speak in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Last week, Beyoncé for whom I am often mistaken, “won a record-breaking 32nd Grammy Award.”¹ In her acceptance speech for her dance/electronic music album, Beyoncé thanked the “queer community for [their] love and for inventing this genre.”² The difficulty with this sentiment was that Beyoncé had also accepted over £20 million to perform in Dubai a few days prior, Dubai of course being in the UAE where homosexuality remains illegal. It is difficult, isn't it, to be rooted in something deeper, and hold on to your principles in a world that can offer some so much in terms of material gain. And at each stage of life, we will be asked what we are really made of.

Many years ago, a young child asked me if I was made of chocolate, to which I of course replied ‘yes’. It was a simple question, which necessitated a simple answer. Though I think I did add that I didn't melt in the sun.

That of which we are made dictates how we interact with, and live within the world. We are challenged to be more than what we own, more than our flesh and bone, more than our life's goals and ambitions, however noble those may be. That of which we are made *is hope*. And this hope of which we are made is hope for things not seen, hope for the right to be seen, hope for our wait for a better world to be heard, and realised, through individual actions and collective responsibility.

We read in Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8, of the future glory, and of our rootedness in creation. As we walk towards Lent, we know that we will be reminded of the words from Genesis 3:19 “you are dust, and to dust you shall return”. These words have haunted this week. The earthquake in Syria and Turkey trapped families and communities in collapsed buildings, and enveloped countless more in grief. Closer to home, the murder of the headteacher of Epsom College, Emma Pattison, and her daughter, Lettie, aged seven, by her husband and the child's father, was yet another signifier of the tragedies that unfold each day in this country.

As one journalist wrote:

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-64533539>.

² <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2023-02-05/grammys-2023-beyonce-full-acceptance-speech-renaissance>.

Last year at least 108 women were killed in circumstances where a man or men were suspected, according to the Counting Dead Women Project. The Epsom College story was one more to add to this long line of statistics, yet more evidence of the horrendous levels of violence against women that we live with. In the same 24-hour period that the Epsom story broke, another horror show was unfolding at Southwark Crown Court. The serial rapist and former police officer David Carrick received 36 life sentences yesterday and will spend at least 30 years in jail. The two stories – Carrick’s sentencing and the Epsom College murders – developed in tandem, both evidence of a problem we seem unwilling to face in its entirety, or to meet like the emergency it is.³

The hope of which we are made needs to be translated into acts that transform our daily lives and how we live as Christians in the world. Yet Paul tells us that:

For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

I don’t know about you, but I am not waiting with patience for the violence against women and girls to end. I am waiting with impatience, with deep longing and indignation that comes out of that which I was made, out of hope.

In a recent sermon we heard about “revolutionary patience”. I would contend that this is born out of the hope of which we are made. Hope for the agitation of the Spirit to awaken a thirst for justice that dispels all manner of apathy, greed and material hoarding; hope for the dignity of, and justice for human bodies, so easily maltreated and abused; hope for the protection of our land and sea and air so readily polluted without accountability.

Between the £32 billion of profit made by Shell this year and the immense injustice done to the Ogoni and other peoples of the Delta region of southern Nigeria lies miles and miles of polluted land and rivers, and the worst forms of white privilege. “In a report in 2011 the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) revealed the devastating impact of the oil industry in Ogoniland, and set out urgent recommendations for “the largest terrestrial clean-up operation in history”. It put the cost of an initial clean-up over five years at \$1bn – around 3% of Shell’s 2022 profits”.⁴ Shell, for God’s sake, clean up your mess. It is racist, pure and simple, for you, Shell, not to take responsibility for these decades of pollution, for the death of infants, the sickness caused to the elderly and the destruction of biodiversity in this precious region.

We heard in Matthew 6:34:

³⁴ So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

³ Alona Ferber, The New Statesman, 8 February 2023, <https://www.newstatesman.com/quickfire/2023/02/epsom-college-david-carrick-trying-unsee-male-violence-against-women> Accessed 11 February 2023.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/02/nearly-14000-nigerians-take-shell-to-court-over-devastating-impact-of-pollution>, Accessed 11 February 2023.

Here we see God's understanding that *there are* things to worry about *today*, and that tomorrow is not as predictable as we would lead ourselves to believe. I think that we like to think we know what will happen tomorrow because it confirms our sense of control and competency, and stops us from being totally overwhelmed. Here Jesus reminds us otherwise, and tells us that it's ok to not know what will happen, because God knows. And the hope of which we are made means that we need to trust in God knowing the particularity of our time and place, in the same way as *our place is known* in eternity.

On 8th February, President Zelensky of the Ukraine spoke movingly and powerfully in the 900-year-old medieval Westminster Hall about his country, his people and our world. He told the story of visiting the UK in the autumn of 2020 and his itinerary which included a visit to the War Rooms, and how a guide there invited him to sit in Churchill's armchair from which the war-time Prime Minister gave orders during World War II. A former sketch comedian and television entertainer and presenter, Volodymyr Zelensky, had no idea of what was to come less than two years later.

It is true to say that, despite our incredible planning, technology, and certain foresight, we still have absolutely no idea what will happen tomorrow. The hope of which we are made makes this unknowing bearable. God understands our human limitations, and Jesus asks us to stay within the horizon of the day before us. There is enough in today to keep us busy, and alert.

God, in the person of Jesus, makes us aware of the parameters of our living, but not of our dreaming. Because we are made of hope, and hope is in our DNA. And it is because of this hope of which we are made that we are asked not to worry about the very real things we all worry about.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

This is a big ask. On appearance this does not seem to be the right gospel for straitened times. The cost-of-living crisis and the pressures under which millions live in this country, and the fear of the loss of livelihoods and land through the climate emergency under which millions more live can seem to make a mockery of this gospel. And yet the gospel remains.

It is important to say that this is not a gospel that preaches laissez-faire attitude to life. Nor is a mandate to ensure that people stay oppressed and subjugated. The worry of which Jesus speaks, for me, seem to point to the anxieties that can push us into hopelessness and despair. It is the weight of the accumulated-soul-eating-anguish that takes us to darker places that Jesus is referring to here.

The hope of which we are made is threatened by the voices that tell us that no one loves us; that we are not as beautiful or lovable as we think; that we are too fat; we are too pale; that we are too dark; that we're the wrong kind of black and the right kind of privilege; that we deserve what happened to us, and that somehow it was our fault; that we will always be alone; that we will die alone; that our lives do not matter; that no one cares about us; that

no one *has ever* cared about us; and that no one cares if we live or die. These voices *are all lies*. And it is because of these voices that we must remember and *hold on* the hope of which we are made. The despair does not have to be the end of the story, even though each day can seem so incredibly overwhelming.

When Jesus mentions the birds, the lilies, the blades of grass, he reminds us that we are known. Although the world tries to convince us that we are not tethered to eternity, *we are individually named* and held in the love and grace of a divine creator.

As we heard in Matthew 6:31:

Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

The key here perhaps is not God’s ignorance of what we actually need to survive, let alone live, but rather the fact the God wants our attention and orientation to *turn towards* a world in which pain is alleviated, corruption is called out and stopped, and the innocent are protected. In the words of one preacher, this passage states simply that:

“God will take care of you ... so take care of God’s justice in the world. There is more to life than concern for daily needs, though this may be difficult for some. But Jesus expects his followers to put forward energy into things that give more meaning to life. We must strive to discern how God is working in the world (i.e., “God’s kingdom”) and how to participate in acts of justice on God’s behalf (i.e., “God’s righteousness”). Beyond that, everything else will take care of itself. Or, to summarize Jesus, God will deal with the rest.”⁵

God asks so much of us, of our participation in co-creating a better world because God is the source of the hope of which we are made. A hope that will hold out to the very last breath.

The hope of which we are made cannot and must not lie dormant. It needs to be turned into action. And when it is, it looks like recognition of wrong, and rightness, and rebalancing. It looks like real fullness of life; it looks like equity.

So, the real ask from God is this: *what are we going to do* as beings of hope to face that which needs to change today so that our tomorrow can so much be better?

Amen.

⁵ Dr Emerson Powery, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/eighth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-624-34> , Accessed 11 February 2023.