

St Francis Day sermon at Hilfield Friary. 4th October 2015

'Don't worry', says Jesus to us in today's gospel reading (Luke 12.22-34). 'Don't worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear'. 'Stop worrying'. 'Don't be afraid little flock'. They are nice words, but easier said than done, for don't we live in a culture which is based upon worry and anxiety? A Health and Safety culture; a risk averse society. Think of what might go wrong; what harm might happen to your home, your health, your pension, your reputation. Beware of the stranger; learn to be suspicious. Be wise: insure against a possible future crisis. In today's world a mega-business has been built on worry. Even the Church has become a place of anxiety - about its purity or its inclusivity; about its boundaries – who can be 'in' and who is 'out'.

And, anyway, don't we all need a bit of worry, a modicum of angst in order to motivate us to action? I need the adrenalin which flows from anxiety in order sit down and prepare a sermon – or anything for that matter. It's because of the growing anxiety about the future of our planet that there is a chance we will actually get an international agreement on carbon emissions in Paris this December. Without any worry we could be so laid back that nothing would ever change.

But Jesus doesn't just urge us to stop worrying, he also tells us to 'consider': 'Consider the lilies', which, despite not busily spinning and weaving, are more beautiful than King Solomon in all his splendour. I suppose he would tell us to consider the orchids on our fields here – the early purple, the common spotted, the pyramidal, the birds nest, the fly, the butterfly, the twayblade, and the southern marsh orchid which we noticed on our land for the first time this year – all different members of the same family. Consider their intricacy, their delicacy, their fragility. And consider, says Jesus, the ravens, who neither sow nor reap, who have neither storehouse nor barn. Ravens are not the most beautiful of birds, they are big and black and more than a tad sinister as they circle, croaking, over the Friary here. But, being of the corvid family, they are among the most intelligent of birds who have a highly developed social life and who seem to be able to work out tasks and problems.

Consider these, says Jesus. Pay attention to them. Look beyond yourself, beyond your worries, beyond your self-preoccupation. Open your eyes and see the beauty and wonder of the world around you, which, in all its fragility and vulnerability, is nevertheless sustained and upheld by the love of God, by the One who is the source and goal of all life. Open your eyes, says Jesus, and move from worry to wonder.

And that, of course, is what Francis, whose feast we are celebrating today, managed by the grace of God to do. Sometime in early adulthood he began to put aside his obsessive pre-occupation with himself, his ambition to become a knight, his concern about reputation among friends, family and neighbours, his fear of disease. He put these things aside by opening his eyes to God's world around him and seeing there the utter giftedness of all things, every creature bearing the imprint of God, its maker's mark; seeing not just the beauty of all creatures but their inter-relatedness, and recognising that he himself was part of their family. Francis' consideration, his paying attention, enabled him to consider a flock of noisy swallows interrupting his preaching, and see in them a community of brothers and sisters ready for the Good News of God's love; to come across a disfigured and stinking leper on the road, and to discover in him his brother in Jesus Christ. Francis' open eyes made him see the world differently, to move from worry to wonder.

But it wasn't just his opened eyes that led Francis to live so freely, peaceably and joyfully. In our Chapel here we have a statue of Francis, a lovely African figure brought back from Tanzania by our brothers when they were living and working there. Yesterday he had his annual wash and brush up, and a spot of Mansion Polish, so that today he is bright and shiny, surrounded not by lilies but by spears of gladioli from our garden, arranged by Br Raymond. But what you can't see because of the flowers, unless you come up close, is that he stands with one hand open.

We all have our own strategies for dealing with worry and anxiety. Some people go to sleep. Other people bite their nails, others busy themselves with displacement activities – re-arranging the furniture; yet others take to food and drink. I can do all of these, but in the face of anxiety my strongest tendency is to want to be in control, to take hold of the situation, to do something about it. It doesn't work, of course, because the grasping hand becomes ever more stressed and dishes out anxiety all round. We live in a society which seeks desperately to control, take hold of its anxiety. By the grace of God, Francis learnt to live with an open hand – the open hand of poverty, simplicity, and humility; open to powerlessness and limitation, but open also to the abundance of God's life and love; open to receive and welcome others, even 'Sister Death' when at last she came to him. Francis' hand is open and empty enough to receive the gift of God's Kingdom.

However, the hand of the statue is also broken. I'm not sure how it happened – it was a long time ago – it might have been an over-zealous sacristan giving him the annual polish for his feast day, but the thumb has been broken off, then stuck back on with glue and the crack painted over. It is not an inappropriate fracture because open hands often get wounded, pierced. What Jesus is offering us in the life of the Kingdom is not safety or security. There are no guarantees of prosperity or even of happiness as defined by contemporary measures of well-being. In fact he seems to say the opposite: blest are those who mourn, who weep, who are poor, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who give up all, who lose their life in order to find it.

Open your eyes, says Jesus; consider the lilies of the field, consider the ravens. Look on the world in a new way; let your imagination and your heart be stretched; see the wonder and the giftedness that is around you. Live in thankfulness and praise. And dare to open your hands to receive the Kingdom which God has promised to give you, and to share God's abundance and God's peace.

Blessed be God who has raised up Blessed Francis as a faithful witness to this amazing generosity and joy.