



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title:
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Isaiah 49:8-18
Second Reading 1 Corinthians 4:1-5,8-13
Gospel Matthew 6:24-34

"So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." At first sight the lessons today seem to give us confusing messages. On the one hand we are called by Saint Paul "stewards of the mysteries of God." On the other hand Jesus tells us not to worry or at least about anything long term. Indeed, in another passage in Philippians, St. Paul instructs his hearers not to worry about anything but instead to pray. That all sounds very pious, but reality seems different.

No one needs to tell us that worry and stress are the blight of our lives. What makes it worse is that whereas once we had an extended family with which to share worry and stress and to receive comfort and help, all too often today we seem to be on our own. In a recent poll, a huge number responded that loneliness was one of the negative aspects of life. It's all very well, we may be thinking, for us to be told to be like the lilies of the field or even the birds of the air. But we live in today's world.

As if we don't have enough to worry about all by ourselves, our television sets daily, even hourly, suggest other worries and stresses. If the proverbial person from outer space sought to evaluate human life by watching television advertisements, the impression would be that we are chronically ill and dysfunctional.

If the pressures and cares of daily life are not enough, today's readings bluntly inform us that the Kingdom of God is our first concern. We are "stewards" of the "mysteries." What on earth does that mean? It sounds suspiciously as if this is an excuse for the stewardship committee to start telling us to increase our pledge or support the MDG project. No doubt we

will shortly be urged to give money to the poor, use less gas, make our homes "green," and find a way to combat global warming. It's as if paying the mortgage, college tuition, affording gas for the cars, dealing with illness, the trials of being young or old, are not enough. Don't we go to church to get comfort?

"But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Now that sounds better. Maybe, we think, that's a bargain we can keep. God seems to like us to worship and sing all those strange hymns, give a bit, support our parish when we have time; and in return, God will give us all we need.

That is exactly not what Jesus is saying. God doesn't bargain with us. Jesus starts this section by telling his hearers to get their priorities right. Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Jesus is using one of the most demeaning institutions humans can experience or impose on others to tell us the facts of life. Slavery was a reality in first-century life. Jesus doesn't condone slavery, but he uses something frightful to demonstrate total goodness. A slave belonged to an owner and was forced to serve that owner exclusively. In one of the most extraordinary passages in the New Testament, St. Paul reminds the Philippian Christians that although Jesus knew of his relationship to God, he emptied himself and became the equal of a slave and gave his life. In that self-emptying, Jesus demonstrated just who he is. He is the one to whom every knee shall bow.

As an old Anglican collect puts it, it is when we serve God that we discover our freedom. Stress, compulsive worry, unacknowledged bitterness and resentment easily become our owner. We can't serve two owners. Sometimes whole communities, parishes, even larger Christian groupings become enslaved to anxiety, to fear of loss, and to dysfunction. Those destroying demons become alternative owners. "No one can serve two owners." Ironically, what Jesus calls "wealth" can be a wealth of troubles to which we cling and which define us and the way we live our lives. In our loneliness, such a wealth of troubles may well own us.

In our baptisms we were called out of such ownership. The fellowship of the church is given by God to enable us to share together the wonder of God's love experienced in community. The community of Christ supports us as we learn to offer up the dreadful things that capture and own us, and love takes their place. This isn't a "once and for all" process. We don't give our lives to God and all becomes lovely. We give ourselves to God daily, hour by hour, and God gives us what the Prayer Book describes as the "means of grace and the hope of glory."

In community, as stewards, servants of God and God's world, we are strengthened in the Holy Meal. And we are strengthened as we read and hear

God's Word to act out love toward all whom we meet, and to take responsibility for a world God made, a world God said was "good" and a world which God intends to restore.

There's no bargain here. Life will continue to be tough. Tragedy happens. Suffering is real. The difference is that, as Christians, we face these dreadful realities, these "crosses," knowing that God in Christ has "been there, done that" in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and that together, in Christ, we are enabled to expose and overcome those dreadful owners we allow to dominate our lives.

Who on earth wants to construct an alternative God called "worry," "stress," "loneliness," "bitterness," and "fear"? The picture of such a dreadful idol would be fearsome. Such a God, such an owner, debilitates us. When we seek the Kingdom of God first and yearn to be "right" with the God of love, everything we need together to be useful and fulfilled servants is provided freely. We see the true God "in the face of Jesus." So we seek first the Kingdom of God and accept with joy the things God adds to us. "The trials that beset us, the troubles we endure" will remain real, but that reality becomes transformed and made glorious as we serve God and do God's will.