

A Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity, August 31, 2008

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“But seek first his kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you”
(from the gospel, Matthew 6:24f.)

In today's gospel (Matthew 6:24ff.) Jesus uses the word “anxiety” five times. Three times he gives a direct command, “Be not anxious.” By itself, this command is not much help, for anxiety cannot be turned on and off like a switch.

The problem is that anxiety is not the real problem. Anxiety, according to Jesus, is a symptom of a wrongly ordered life. A doctor may treat symptoms to make us more comfortable. But a good doctor will try to cure the underlying disease, knowing that this will get rid of the symptoms as well.

The underlying disease, according to Jesus, is the worship of mammon: “You cannot serve God and mammon.” In essence, mammon means money. We serve mammon when our lives are governed by material concerns...“What shall we eat? Or, what shall we drink? Or, what shall we wear?” Or what kind of house shall we live in? Or, what kind of car shall we drive? Or, how shall we save for college? Or, how shall we have enough money to retire?

Now, we must make a distinction here. For each of us must, in some way, ask and answer these very questions. We must all eat and drink and, so, must at some point consider the content of the meal. We must all get dressed and, so, at some point, consider what to wear. And, remember, the wise virgins made provision for oil in the future to keep their lamps burning.

Jesus did not say, “You must not plan for the future.” He said, “Don't be anxious.” There is a way of being diligent but also faithful. There is a way of doing the things we are called to do to the glory of God and letting God take care of the results.

Consider the story of Mary and Martha. Martha was busy making dinner for Jesus. Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to the word of God. Martha was anxious about the meal and angry with her sister for not helping. She complained and Jesus said, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things.” (10:41).

Jesus did not criticize Martha for making dinner, for merely asking, “What shall we eat?” Jesus criticized Martha for her anxious preoccupation with food preparation. Had she prepared the meal to the glory of God, happy to do the work God has given her, and happy to give her sister opportunity to be with Jesus, Jesus might have said, “Well done.”

There is a way of doing necessary things to the glory of God, and there is a way of doing necessary things in service to mammon.

Jesus said, “Seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness.” The kingdom of God is the realm or dimension of reality where God is king and his will is perfectly done. By virtue of our baptism and our faith in Jesus Christ, we are citizens of the kingdom of God.

The Bible talks about “the world” as a realm distinct from the kingdom of God. Because of sin, the

world operates independently of God. Sin, both original and actual, is humanity's way of saying, "God, we don't want you to rule over us." Our salvation begins when, through repentance and faith, we acknowledge that Jesus is Lord and we begin to live for his kingdom.

Living for the kingdom, or seeking first the kingdom, is not an easy or simple thing to do. In the temptation in the wilderness, the devil showed Jesus "All the kingdoms of the world" and offered them to him (Matthew 4:8). In the spiritual life, the devil tries, continually, to buy us off, to give us the temporary in exchange for the eternal.

The life of prayer, which the church and the Holy Spirit call us to live, is about living for the kingdom in a disciplined way. Life is full of temptations and tests that pull us away from the kingdom and towards the service of mammon. Through spiritual disciplines of almsgiving, prayer and fasting we continually orient ourselves away from the world, the flesh and the devil and towards the kingdom.

We seek first the kingdom by worshiping God first, on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, the day Jesus rose from the dead. We seek first the kingdom of God by honoring God first with our money. We seek first the kingdom when we begin life with prayer—when the encounter with God is the priority, and our work is the result or fruit of our prayer.

These ordinary disciplines are the way we begin to orient life towards the kingdom. And they are the beginning of the battle, for the devil tries continually to turn our priorities upside down. He says, Do what you want now and worship God next week. Do the work first and pray later. Get what you want and give God what is left. When we listen, our lives become wrongly oriented, we serve mammon and not God, and we wonder why we feel so empty and anxious.

Beyond basic spiritual disciplines, seeking first the kingdom requires that we bring the concerns of the kingdom with us into the home, the office and the places of recreation. We must ask, What does the kingdom of God look like in this situation? What course of action honors God, is the right thing to do and serves the good of the people involved?

These are not always easy questions to answer. Sometimes the will of God is not clear and we have to work through the issue in prayer over time. That is precisely what Jesus meant us to do when he said, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness."

When we begin, as a habit of life, to seek first the kingdom of God through prayer and in each situation, life becomes rightly ordered. We are freed to do what God calls us to do, and let God take care of the results. Anxiety about things is replaced with trust in God. Worry gives way to faith.

As Philippians says, "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made know to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (RSV 4:6-7).