

Harvest Festival

Matthew 6:25-34

Jesus said, *Look at the birds of the air* and then he said something else, *Look at the birds of the air... Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow*. Those are words that go to the heart of the gospel. First principles, if you like, we are going to talk about first principles.

First principles are the things you should never forget. *We believe in God, In the beginning was the Word*. There is a reason why we start where we do. And it is startling to notice that first principles are much easier to forget than we imagine. There was a wedding once, a wedding in the church where I was Vicar, where the bride forgot her bouquet, someone was despatched and it was hurried up the aisle just in time to be carried out. That was an important and unusual thing to forget. Worse though, was the service of blessing after a civil marriage ceremony. I was standing at the church door and, beside me, I had a bride and groom, but no bridesmaids. I wondered when the bridesmaids might arrive. That was when the groom confessed he had forgotten to tell them where the church was. That was a very serious thing to forget and we discovered that the bride had only limited patience for the absurd. They had a first, and very unpleasant, marital dispute in church, on their wedding day.

That was forgetfulness, there is something more serious that can creep in, an inability to see the glaringly obvious, the staggering capacity to forget the things you just should never forget. As a child all my holidays were spent in Scotland. When I was not throwing stones into windswept lochs in a force nine gale on an August day, I was visiting Scottish castles and Scottish battlefields in the rain. And it was thus as a very young boy I learnt the story of the battle of Stirling Bridge. The English army routed the Scots at the Battle of Dunbar in 1296. They did that by crossing a stream to take the Scots on their own ground. A year later, in September 1297, The Earl of Surrey, victor at Dunbar, came to Stirling Bridge where a Scottish army under William Wallace was drawn up over the river. Surrey knew what to do and promptly sent his cavalry over the bridge. The thing he forgot was that only two knights could cross a narrow bridge at one time. The Scots watched the English process slowly over the bridge. They watched, and they waited, until the English had assembled a force the Scots knew they could defeat, about 2,000 and then the Scots attacked and defeated them. The rest of the English army fled and abandoned all the Lowlands to the Scots. The film *Braveheart*, showed us Wallace's victory at Stirling, only without the bridge, which was another and different way of overlooking first principles.

First principles matter, they are best not forgotten. With that in mind, let's turn to our gospel reading which began,

do not worry about your life...

...and continued with birds of the air and lilies of the field. This is a reading chosen for harvest, chosen because it says something about food.

Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

A reading about food and the fact that it is God who feeds the birds of the air, a reading fit for harvest. Except it is not, not reading about food and not a reading for harvest. To get back to those first principles we need to start a verse earlier than our reading allowed,

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will... hate the one and love the other... You cannot serve God and wealth. Matthew 6:24

We need to hear that

You cannot serve God and wealth. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life.

This is not a reading about food and harvest. This is a statement of first principles. It is an either or – either God, or wealth, not both. It is a particular either/or. Jesus says you cannot serve God or wealth. That is a choice you have to make. Now you might be a Scottish country dancer, you might be helplessly, hopelessly in love with one of the gentlemen of the choir, you might be a member of Her Majesty's government and face this dilemma. You can be any of those things and so preoccupied by them that you do not serve God, you can be any of those things and *still* serve God. That is a choice you do not *have* to make. Scottish country dancing does not have to interfere with your faith, but it might. But you *cannot* serve God and wealth.

It is as if the disciples are standing before Jesus and he says to them, *You have forgotten the first thing, You have forgotten the most important thing, You cannot serve God and wealth, the body is more than clothing.*

Why can you not serve God and wealth? Because, Jesus says, *the body is more than clothing.* You cannot serve God and wealth because the body is more than clothing. It is a point about what really matters and what does not matter at all. We get in a muddle about faith, we are inclined to think that faith is the extra effort we put in. There are people who do not have faith and there are people who try a bit harder. If you think like that you think you cannot serve God and money because serving God is a higher priority, less trivial, more worthwhile. That is not what Jesus says. Jesus says you *cannot* serve God and wealth, because, *the body is more than clothing.* The point about my body and my clothes is that *I am* a body, but *I wear* my socks. You cannot serve God and wealth because you have to know the difference between what you are and what you have.

That is something we find really difficult. We are inclined to think that we are the achievements we have piled up: grade 3 clarinet, learning to drive and getting a job with the Woolwich; or perhaps we think we are the possessions we have accumulated: I am a house owner and a collector of rare stamps, or even is we think we are the clothes we wear, many, many of us get confused about the difference between what we are and what we possess.

And this is the point about first principles, the first principle we forget. It is the heart of the gospel, a *given*, that our life and indeed our salvation are a gift from God. Life is *not* what we make it. I am not my own work in progress. My life is exactly what I just said it was a given,

a gift. Because we forget that, forget the given, we start with *this* life and we think about what we must do with it. Life becomes a responsibility and a duty. If we start instead with what we have been given the first response is not effort, it is thankfulness.

And this is not just theology. This is fundamental. The point about first principles is that you forget them at your peril. Have you noticed that our political parties (pretty well all our political parties) now want to describe themselves as the party for *working people*? *We are not the party of people on benefits, we are the party that will reward hard work* – they could be Tory statements, in fact they are both recent Labour pronouncements. We are beguiled by status, by possession, by achievement by work. And it is not the gospel.

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap... Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, Matthew 6:26,28

Jesus directs our attention to things that do no work, birds and lilies are not part of the world of industry, they do not have jobs, they do not make things. Birds and lilies do not belong to the world of cause and effect, all those processes where I push a button, or pull a lever and make something happen.

It is all too easy to make our harvest festival a celebration of hard work; too easy to think that here God rewards the efforts of those who make an effort. There is nothing wrong with hard work, except that it will take over and define you. We lock ourselves into a world of cause and effect, of levers and buttons in which everything depends on us. It is a world where everyone gets what they deserve, a world of effort, achievement and reward. You can do it with essays as a student, you can do it with corporate targets, you can do it with the Chapter strategy, you can do it with the housework. We see worth in terms of achievement and Jesus stands before us to tell us we have forgotten the most important thing. Our worth is a free gift of God, the status we seek is a given.

We make human life a great enterprise, a hamster wheel of effort. We can spend a lifetime's effort longing to be told we have done well. We can be surprised and disappointed when we stumble at the hurdle we erected for ourselves. And, by every test I can think of, you cannot describe the ministry of Christ as a great achievement. As enterprise goes, it was a failure. He died derided, powerless and without possession. They dined for his clothing, remember, *is not the body more than clothing*. His gospel was the gospel of generous, overflowing love, a gospel of pointless love. In the life of Christ, in the Kingdom of God no one gets what they deserve they get more, and the sick are healed, the dead raised, the hungry fed. It really was not a gospel for working people.

God radically turns the tables on our righteousness, on our sense of cause and effect. Life is not something we do, it something we are given. It is not promotion, or applause, or achievement, God offers it is actually the polar opposite of the attempt to be more than are, better than we were yesterday. This Harvest Festival should be for us a reminder of first principles, a reminder of the given-ness of things. Here is a glimpse of the generosity of God; here is an invitation to live generously and be generous. Here is an invitation to stop trying to make something of ourselves and accept what God will make of us,

strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well Matthew 6:33