

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 & Luke 12:32-40
From Anxiety to Treasure

Anxiety... fear... worry.... it's familiar stuff. We're all afraid of something – it's just that some of us manage to mask it better than others. It can be about so many different things: fear of getting things wrong, fear about how we're going to cope with a situation, or maybe it's worries about our health, or perhaps about our finances. The possibilities are endless.

Jesus comes along and says, 'Do not be afraid.' Sounds good, but... and I'm sure most of us can fill in what follows the 'but.' Then he goes on, 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.' Not exactly what you get in one of those self-help books that teach how to banish anxiety from one's life, but then Jesus is offering a very different view of life.

Jesus talks about God's kingdom. The kingdom is life as God intended it, with God's love sweeping the world, so that every human being knows that they're loved by God – and knowing that, being able to rest in the knowledge that God will do the best for them.

We can think of God as one who demands things of us, but God wants to give to us, and for us to experience relationships of loving care – with God and with one another. And love, which is the very nature of God, is devoid of fear. An early Christian writer put it like this, 'There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts our fear.' A life based on the awareness of God's love for us – a life that's lived out with others who share that love – is a life without fear, for love and fear don't go together. So, when I get scared, when I start worrying about things, I turn to that knowledge – that we're loved by God for who we are.

Jesus goes on and says, 'Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven.' A default position when we're fearful or anxious is to fall back on things like possessions and power, money and status. But these don't bring us lasting happiness. They aren't the source of real life. Jesus speaks of 'treasure in heaven'. By that he doesn't mean something that we'll collect when we die. Heaven is as much for this life now as a life after death. This is the kingdom that God desires to give us – a way of living that's rooted in the knowledge that we're loved and cared for as God's beloved children.

Once we begin to grasp this (and I readily admit that it's a learning I'm having to constantly grow into), Jesus' comment about selling what we have and giving to the poor starts to make sense. It speaks of a life in which we're free to focus on others and not just ourselves. Once we've embraced the love that God has for us, it changes the way we see God, ourselves, and others – and we're able to share it with those about us. We become what we receive and pass on what we've been given.

This brings us to the first reading. Isaiah refers to Sodom and Gomorrah. These place names are often associated with sexual sin, but that wasn't the issue. God got angry with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their total disregard for visitors to their town and their failure to care for those in need. It's a condemnation of the way the poor were being oppressed. The people in Isaiah's time had been doing very religious things like offering animal sacrifices, but this wasn't what God wanted. God desires people to serve those in need – to love God *and* love those about them.

What we see here is a silo mentality. People divide their lives into compartments – one marked religion, one work, another home, and so on. They have wonderful religious festivals but there's no carry over to the way they treat the poor and their faith doesn't affect the way they conduct business. But we can't separate our faith from the rest of life. It's no good having beautiful worship

while at the same time ignoring those in need. Worship and justice go hand in hand.

Perhaps a reason why people behave un-lovingly towards others is because they're afraid. We treat others badly, we act unjustly, because our anxiety has taken us over. In the Gospel reading we see that people hoard possessions and make them the big thing in their lives because they're scared of not having enough. We ignore the needs of others because we're afraid for ourselves. But what happens when we're no longer dominated by fear? What happens when we know ourselves to be valued? We find a freedom to love others, to give generously, and act kindly. If we're secure in God's love for us – if we remember that it's our Father's delight to give us the kingdom – then we're free to reach out to others and to share what we've been given.

I think this is what Jesus means when he talks about being ready for his return – about his coming at an unexpected hour. In the series of pictures Jesus gives, we see people actively doing things – dressed for action; lamps lit; ready to open the door; alert. They aren't sitting around waiting for something to happen. They're busy with their preparations. It's a mistake to put Jesus' coming out into the future. This is as much about today as when we die or when Christ comes again. Jesus doesn't want us to miss his coming in the ordinary stuff of life – in opportunities to share God's care with others through simple acts of generosity and compassionate support.

Knowing God's delight in wanting to give us the kingdom, reminds us of where our true treasure is. We won't find it by acquiring and hanging onto more and more things, but in reaching out in loving care and generosity. This is what makes it possible for us to be prepared for God's kingdom and to participate in it. And this is the way by which God helps us to live more fully and fearlessly, today, and for the rest of our lives.

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