

St Peters Ealing

Sunday 19th February 2017

Don't worry, be happy!

It is said Mohandas Gandhi read the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew's Gospel every day. For him it contained inalienable truths that crossed all boundaries and had the power to touch all lives. He believed it had more power than the British Empire or divisions between Hindus and Muslims. He made 'experiments in truth' such as public fasting to put Jesus' teachings into practice for the sake of the peace of India. Though a Hindu, Gandhi believed Jesus' teachings were not so much a set of ideas to be quoted or poured over, rather they are practices we should carry out to guide us into an in-depth relationship with each other and with God.

There are times however when this seems incredibly difficult. Our passage today seems to be more in that category. How can we possibly not worry about food and clothes when our very physique, our very existence depends upon them. We don't have sufficient natural covering to keep us warm, we have no feathers or fur to keep out the cold and rain. Without clothing we would die. Our clothing does not grow on trees. Our ancestors learnt how to produce garments for this exact reason, survival. Lilies in the field have no need of any other form of covering. They are designed to be rained upon and they don't get cold. The birds of the air have ample feathers, water repellent and insulating. Our ancestors grappled with hunting and then agriculture because foraging was inefficient and unsustainable. The minute we get into farming there is plenty to worry about. So what on earth can Jesus possibly mean when he says not to worry about clothing or drink or food? And what could a great man like Gandhi possibly see in such nonsense?

Of course, Jesus doesn't make it that simple for us. If he did there would be little or no power in his words. To simply take them at face value is to miss the depth of understanding of the human condition he places in the teaching. You know that as well as I do. Jesus is encouraging us to push that much further and in the pushing to come closer to God. Yet Jesus also knows how weak and inconsistent we are; how hopeless we can be in our ability or lack of it to search for God in life. We are quite happy to read about God and on our own terms to claim allegiance. But then we excuse ourselves in our business and the seeming complexity of modern living from having to overly commit to Jesus' teaching. We do after all have to provide for families, worry about mortgage payments, make our mark at work and play. We, unfortunately, are forced to give God what time is left whilst struggling to make our own way in the world.

In Richard Curtis' 2013 film entitled 'About Time', the main character, Tim, played by Domhnall Gleeson, discovers he can travel back in time. He can travel back in time and change things, getting a second chance or changing the outcomes for people he cares about. He soon discovers that trying to fix things can become really complicated. Eventually

he learns to live every day without having to relive it – ‘as if it were the final day of his ordinary, extraordinary life.’ The film ends with Tim relishing time with his family, so aware of the graciousness of these moments first time around that he had no need to relive them. It is in the ordinary, the simple things of the present moment that we are fulfilled and made whole.

Jesus’ words are about that very truth. That nothing else matters and everything else can get in the way. His words are about how we live our lives by the right priorities. The right priorities for a Christian being a God centred life. We can’t possibly do that when we let the worries and concerns of the world crowd in. When we don’t have our lives focused on God. That doesn’t mean we don’t have all those other things in our life. It just means we don’t have to worry about them. Jesus challenges us to see the world in a different way. A way that focuses on God, that sees the world through God. If our focus, our view is tempered by a divine lens then our perspective on the world changes. Food, clothes, roofs over our heads are all still important. We need clothing, we need sustenance, we need shelter. These priorities don’t go away. Our emphasis on them though changes. It becomes one where we no longer miss out on love, relationships, family, friends. It is one where priorities are those things that truly build us, not just ourselves either but those around us, those with whom we come into contact, those with whom we share and whom we serve. Jesus’ teaching is about that love that builds, that shares, that gives as well as receives.

It is no accident we have spent the past few Sundays reading the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus’ core teachings are given to us with the aim of helping us to prepare for the coming season of Lent, which is but just over a week away. Lent is a time set aside to encourage us in our spiritual growth. To come closer to God and go deeper in our relationship with God. We can only do this if we open ourselves to the teachings of the Gospel and, like Ghandi, see the value in Jesus’ teachings and live them. In Lent that is our challenge, to live anew to words of Jesus, making them manifest to ourselves and others through our own lives, where we no longer worry about worldly things because we are focused on a God.