

Proper 14 Year C 2022 (NRCL)

'Do not be afraid'. It is an imperative, not a suggestion. We have heard it before in Luke's Gospel. The angel told Zechariah not to be afraid, when he - the angel - came to tell him that his barren wife would have a child; and again Mary was greeted with 'Fear not' when she learnt that she was to give birth to the Son of God. The angel was there again, saying 'do not be afraid' when the birth of Jesus was announced to the shepherds. Simon Peter heard those words when Jesus called him to become a fisher of men; Jairus heard them when the news came that his daughter had died - so don't trouble the master further - and the disciples heard them more than once as they struggled to understand who Jesus was and what they had got themselves into. Isn't it odd that all these encounters with the divine begin with these words - 'Do not be afraid', or 'Fear not'? And not just in Luke's Gospel - we heard them at the beginning of the OT reading - 'Do not be afraid, Abram . . . your reward shall be very great'.

'Do not be afraid, little flock'. If we are the little flock then Jesus must be the shepherd - and a shepherd takes care of his sheep. Indeed, Jesus tells us that not only is he our shepherd but he is the good shepherd - another reason not to be afraid.

God comes not in judgement but bearing gifts - indeed, the ultimate gift - the kingdom. God is the loving divine provider of our needs. Like members of a flock, we are dependent upon our shepherd, for care and protection, but we are not to be afraid for it is our Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom. We don't have to earn it - get enough Brownie points - and we don't have to deserve it - avoid black marks - we simply have to accept it as a blessing and be thankful; and not be afraid - afraid of all those things which the world worries about - status, respect, power, uncertainty. The Father does not give grudgingly, reluctantly; he takes pleasure in being gracious and generous, so Jesus urges his disciples (that's you and me) to give graciously themselves, and then we will find that we have abundant treasure - treasure which age cannot tarnish, treasure which cannot be stolen from us, treasure that no moth can destroy. If we accept this treasure which God wants to give us, our hearts will be in the right place.

I suspect that the people for whom Luke was writing his Gospel were afraid, afraid of many things, which is why Luke's Jesus keeps emphasising the need not to fear. Afraid of being killed? Every hair of your head has been counted. Afraid you might have

to stand up and defend the Gospel? The HS will give you the words to say. Afraid of an uncertain future, so stockpiling goods - you fool, you cannot take it with you when you go.

'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom'. This is not a God who, after creating the universe, sits back and dispassionately watches it all unfold. This is a God who attends to sparrows, to ravens, to the lilies of the field, (if only we did that) - a God whose concern for human kind is so great that he promises us the treasures of heaven - the kingdom.

The message of today's Gospel reading is not, most definitely not, 'Be ready so that you can avoid punishment', but rather 'Be ready so that you will receive blessing'. After all, those who are ready when the master comes will be the guests at a heavenly feast. The Gospel has freed us from grovelling before God or trying to earn his approval. Approval, love, mercy, encouragement are freely given, if we will accept these things. Of course, we don't know when the master will return, only that he will return - at an unexpected hour. So are we on high alert or asleep at the wheel?

It is very easy to be asleep at the wheel. Most people in this country are, certainly when it comes to climate catastrophe or water shortages, the powers that be are definitely asleep at the wheel. But being on high alert? That sounds impossible. But it is not about constantly looking over your shoulder to see if God is watching - surely it is about just (just!) developing a way of life, an attitude, that sees everything (life itself) as a gift from a generous God - a God so generous that the life he gives can be given away with abandon, with equal generosity, developing a generosity of spirit which is always present even if it isn't in focus. Tacit awareness of the needs of others, peripheral vision of the world around us, always ready to be surprised (or surprising), amazed, woken up.

Human sinfulness encourages us to believe, like the farmer in last Sunday's Gospel reading, that security and happiness lie solely in getting, and that giving instead of taking will lead to destitution, desperation and deprivation. But the Gospel promises that giving from what we have will make us mindful of the God of blessing and ready to receive the gifts which God offers. The less we want to have the less we need to have - and recognising that is one of God's blessings. Living a life of giving allows us to live not

on the brink of destruction but on the brink of blessing - where knowing that the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour is something about which we should not be afraid, but rejoice in. So do not be afraid, little flock, it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom - to give you the kingdom so that you can pass it on, give it away, throw it around with gay abandon, and so make yourselves ready to open the door to the Master who wants to invite you to his festive table. Now, how could we possibly be afraid of a God who wears an apron?