

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

‘Consider the lilies,’ Jesus says, ‘how they grow.’ He is addressing an anxious crowd, and it sounds like boring advice, sort of useless. Imagine if you told me you were worried — worried about the rising cost of energy, the shuttered shops and restaurants, the lack of fuel at the petrol station, the continued shortages of goods all around the globe but especially in Britain — and I said, ‘Stop and smell the roses.’ It wouldn’t seem appropriate, would it?

‘Consider the lilies’. Really? Well, believe it or not, *Yes*. The Lord’s advice is not superficial, nor is it insensitive. Rather, it has within it the potential to reshape the way we live and how we look at the world, with clear eyes. This is good advice, teaching appropriate for our celebration of Harvest today, and a command consonant with our experience in the middle of the shocks of Covid-19 and Brexit.

Jesus’ statements draw on a long biblical tradition of reflection on nature. We see this most clearly in the book of Proverbs, in the Wisdom of Solomon, and in Ecclesiasticus. The authors look to the habits of animals and the patterns of creation in order to draw lessons. Most importantly, they speak of the way the earth’s natural rhythms are not independent, but are ordered by God. ‘Winter and summer, seedtime and harvest,’ the course of the sun and stars, the waxing and waning moon with its power over ocean tides, the fruitfulness of the earth. All these are gifts. As St Paul says in the Acts of the Apostles,

‘God has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.’

All life — from the lowliest worm to the high-flying eagle, from bacteria and viruses up through the chain of being to plants, to animals, reptiles, mammals, and humans, even to things in space, even to angels — *all* is in God's hand. One community of being established by divine order. This is why Jesus can say, 'Consider the lilies, how they grow', and his counsel is true and right for us. It strikes close to home. The things we enjoy, the things that sustain our life, are part of Nature. They are not separate from it. We do not stand at a distance from Nature. There is a continuum that contains the beauty of the lilies, the lifecycles of birds, and the harvests that we rely on.

But if this is true (and it is), why is everything off kilter? Why are birds dying? Why are there so few bees in developed countries that agriculture is threatened? Why does the River Thames have the highest recorded levels of microplastics in the world?

These are not inevitable results of modern development; they are the results of human activity run amok. We no longer seek to live within the order of nature; we want to stand at a distance and be lords over it, and seek as much gain from it as we can: ever greater levels of production, ever more efficient methods, leading to higher and higher levels of personal wealth, concentrated (usually) in the hands of the few. This is no way to live.

Jesus says this in Matthew 6.24, the verse right before our reading today,

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. 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...

And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like *one* of these.

The glory of God shines in the lilies of the field; the mercy of God abounds in the earth's natural rhythms. But the pursuit of wealth wrecks these things. It makes the fields ugly, makes the earth barren, void, chaotic. It can make a good person wicked.

So Jesus' advice, 'Consider the lilies' is neither boring nor insensitive; it penetrates to the heart of things, to the problems besetting us. But in particular, it addresses our obsession with possessing things. And it reminds us: we can build our life in one way or another. We could think that building the perfect wardrobe and looking good is what life is about. We could think that consuming things is what life is about: having fine and rare wines, food and spices shipped from all over, all the latest cookery books and fancy kitchen gadgets, you name it.

That is a way to live. It is not the way of Christ. The Lord said, 'Your heavenly Father knows you need' food, drink, and clothing. 'But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.'

We need to get our priorities straight. The good life is not about *Me, me, me, what can I get, what can I enjoy*. The good life is about God, his kingdom, his justice. The good life is an orderly one, lived in harmony with our neighbour, and that neighbour includes all creatures.

This is not a miserly way to live. I don't want you to mistake my words. There is nothing wrong with taking pleasure in the world and enjoying it; it is when our desires go beyond good limits that things become a problem. And we know this because we can see what God has promised to those who love him. He does not promise an unhappy future.

What does the psalmist say? "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dreamed, then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy."

And what does God promise in Joel's prophecy?

This is a text about restoration and abundance:

O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God; for he has given you the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain as before.

The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. ...

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you.

The promise of God's kingdom is the promise of ever abundant harvests, unfailing plenty, fullness, and pleasures evermore.

My friends, how could we refuse such a gift? Let us only receive it, take it into our hands, and be ready to remould our lives and our world in the power of the Spirit that we may be worthy of so great a grace.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*