

Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – February 26, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
St. Paul’s Cathedral, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,000 words

How many times has someone told you not to worry? Or how many times have you told others not to worry? It’s easy to say, but much harder to do. In that sense, perhaps it’s often not very helpful advice. Indeed, some might accuse the Lord of giving precisely that sort of unhelpful advice in today’s gospel, as if not worrying were as simple as pressing a button: OK, now that you’ve told me not to worry, I won’t! If only it were that easy! But Jesus doesn’t give throwaway advice; no, he does all things well. If we listened to this gospel attentively, we heard him also teach us how it is that we can live out his command not to worry about our lives.

He first calls to mind the world of nature. The Lord provides marvelously for all living creatures, from the birds of the air to the flowers of the field. None of these creatures has intelligence properly speaking: they do not have self-reflection and free will; they act on instinct and according to design. Thus, in the hierarchy of beings, they are not nearly as important as human beings, made in the image and likeness of God with intellect, memory, and will. If God provides for such lesser beings, will he not provide for us more important ones also? It’s a rhetorical question that invites us to reflect more deeply upon nature and our place in it – as well as God’s marvelous providence for all.

But then the Lord comes to the point, and it’s a great way for us to enter into the season of Lent. “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness”, he says, “and all these things will be given you besides.” In other words: put God first in your life. Do you struggle with worry and anxiety? Well, check to see if you’ve really put God first – before the worries. Arrange all your other priorities around him. Sometimes we hear formulaic versions of this principle, such as: “God first, family second, work third, me last”. How ever we work it out, we often fail at living it out. This Lent, then, how can we get better at putting God first? There are many senses in which God can be first, but I want to focus on just one today.

In fact, I’ve noticed something particular in my own life. Priests are strongly encouraged to make a daily holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament. Not being a morning person, the temptation for me often is to do my holy hour at night. And whatever time I do it, it certainly makes a difference. But when I make the sacrifice to do so in the morning, I almost always notice that the day goes smoother. It’s not that problems go away, but that I have more grace (and perhaps greater focus on God) to deal effectively with them. It’s not that worries dissipate entirely; there are still temptations to worry! But I am able to respond to those worries with, “Lord, I have given you the first part of my day, and now I will do my best – you handle the rest.” And he does, in one way or another.

So chronologically putting the Lord first in my day helps a great deal, even if it’s not when I am at my freshest. It’s not about me, it’s about the Lord – that’s what he commands. Now you might not have time to do a full hour of prayer in the morning, but do you nevertheless take some time for meditation then? Do you offer your day to God? Do you offer your family to God? What about your work situations, and the other problems of life? Offer them to God at the beginning of the day, and then strive to keep that focus throughout, and you will notice a difference as well.

Ultimately the Lord invites us to see that while we are not as unimportant as little birds or delicate flowers in the grand scheme of things, yet we are not nearly as important as him, either. We are small; God is infinitely bigger: “He’s got the whole world in his hands”. All time belongs to him. He is the Lord of history. And he graciously calls us to be part of that story and even act as protagonists in it. How can we possibly hope to do so with success, unless we learn to put him first? When we start putting him first, it may take time for things to change: we are not machines.

But they will change. The Lord invites us to stay firmly connected with him in reality and in the present. Yesterday has already been and cannot be changed; tomorrow is not here yet and how we live today will affect, at least in part, what tomorrow brings. Therefore, live today, and live it with God.

I would like to propose a Lenten challenge. If you don't do it already, start saying the Morning Offering prayer each day. You can easily find it via internet search, and most prayer books have it also. There are slight variations but almost all of them begin with, "O Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer you all of my prayers, works, joys, and sufferings of this day...". Let it be the first prayer you say each day when you wake up – before you check Facebook, before you turn on the news, before even you start the coffee. There are many other ways to put God first in our lives, but I don't want to go on too long; plus, I am convinced that if we sincerely and consistently make him first chronologically, he will help us to see the other areas where we need improvement also. He loves us with an unfathomable love and wants to be our all. "Put me first" – he says to us this week – "and I will take care of the rest".