

HOMILY, Second Sunday before Lent, Ilkley, St Margaret

Readings: Romans 8: 18-25; Matthew 6: 25-end

It's been the kind of week that curates dream of: perhaps not quite meeting myself coming back, but nevertheless with quite more than enough to go at!

There have been meetings and masses, visits and guests, emails and follow-ups, all negotiated with Fr Alex very much at the end of a WhatsApp message, but still needing to be done somewhat independently and perhaps with a closer degree of thought at the present moment. Fr Alex isn't yet well enough to be here for everything.

It is good; I like a challenge and the form of lassitude built on trust and mutual respect that this curacy gives to me: it means precisely that when someone's ill or unable in a team – as is the case with us at the moment – things don't fall apart, but rather operate within the freedom of hopefulness that is offered when we have to work differently or innovatively to achieve what needs to be done.

Of course, where hope is operative, fear also lurks. This is pretty natural in and of itself. Our human condition is tempered in the dichotomy of hope and fear – God Almighty knows this, and yet works within both – whose grace is enough to perfect within us the growth of such love that fear will eventually be cast out, till love alone is left. Such is the character of the one who, in Jesus, “empties himself of all but love,” as Charles Wesley puts it, that we may be enabled to love for Love's sake.

Love is constantly creative and recreational; its way is always to surprise us, to change us, and “to raise us up to more than we can be.” So as the psalmist says, we “should not fear, though the earth be moved, and though

the mountains tremble in the heart of the sea.” This isn’t the same as saying that we should deny the feelings to which worry, anxiety, doubt and fear give rise within us. However, these can never ultimately hold us with the faithfulness – the confidence – of him who is our eternal refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble. In the changed circumstances of mental and physical health and wellbeing; in the grasp of chronic pain, addiction or debt, and in the many complex worries that beset us, “we have an anchor that keeps the soul steadfast and sure while the billows roll,” as the old Baptist hymn reminds us.

Where have you seen and that anchor this week or in your life recently? I saw it this week in at least three meetings, by two hospital beds, in the making of a simple meal, in a pleasant ride in the car and in the recitation of the daily office, in the companionship of a friend. Lilies growing, though they neither toil nor spin; millions of sparrows numbered in the sight of God and fed by him, in spite of neither reaping nor sowing nor gathering into barns.

Miraculously, by faith and never by sight alone, there is feeding, there is growth, there is an anchor hold through all the changing scenes of life, grounded firm and deep in the Saviour’s love. And it is the power of this love that casts out fear and perpetuates life and light. “This is the victory that overcomes the world,” says St John: “our faith.” (1 Jn. 5:4). This is the cross that teaches and inspires us to suffer and to die, that we might better live.

Often, it feels impossible not to worry. Some of us are predisposed to this mindset anyway; it’s simply part of us – and then we turn on the news or look on Facebook and the paralysis sets in. It sets in because suffering is a reality, as St Paul reminds the church in Rome, and we share the literal and

figurative pain of so many people in our days. Yet the living hope hidden with Jesus Christ in God whom we love, but cannot see, is equally real; it is also stronger than worry – even than death. And it promises a lasting end to suffering and the restoration of all things back to the beauty of perfect holiness.

The Spirit of God brooks no paralysis; it only wills our good; our healthfully becoming the best and fullest versions of ourselves in the limitless depths of the Saviour's love.

If God so clothes the grass of the field, will he not much more clothe you, clothe us, clothe the church he sent his Son to espouse – we of little faith, whose loving grace is sufficient to create us from nothing and yet more lovingly transform the poverty of our nature into holy and plenteous grain: the planting of the Lord, to declare his righteousness. God's desire for us is simply this. And as it abides and is allowed to grow in us, so it purifies our worry and satisfies the wants of our fear. We find a harbour in the peace of Christ, through the incomplete temporal to the steadfast and sure abundance of the eternal.

Will our anchor hold, then, in the storms of life? In the worry that is all around, and amid the fear that would eventually paralyze us if we let it. Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love, by his grace, it will, so that we may be holy grain, a pure offering, a righteous declaration of the Father's light in a longing world.

This is our vocation, and we share it with none other than Jesus himself. May he grant us the strength to live it out in faith with him – confident in the triumphant salvation of the cross that teaches and inspires us – keeping us strong in faith, hope and love, today and always. **AMEN**