

Do Not Worry

Last week I was forced to do something most would regard as insane. It all started six months ago, when two mice from my house stowed away in a rubbish bag which I placed in the boot of my car. I caught one mouse within a matter of days. The other is not far from either of us, because my car is parked outside. This second mouse has defied gravity and various other laws of nature, as it has cheekily removed peanut butter from a carefully prepared trap, without ever springing the trap. So much peanut butter has it removed, that last week I had to go and buy a new jar of the stuff, because this mouse has – in the last six months – consumed an entire jar. It seems like a small price to pay when the alternative is having the cloth seats used as mouse-food. But I was having one of my regular bouts of frustrated defeat with this mouse, when I read from these words of the Gospel about God looking after all these little insignificant creatures, and wondered whether this was why I had failed to exterminate it! I am now having to budget for my mouse!

The Gospel reading today comes from the sermon on the mount, and in our NIV bibles, they come under the heading ‘do not worry’, because God looks after us even more than he looks after the tiniest parts of his creation. It dovetails with the reading from Isaiah, as it exhorts the people to trust in a God who will not forget them. The Holy city of Jerusalem lay in ruins, the promised land was no longer flowing with milk and honey, it’s inhabitants were short of food and water. Hope was in short supply. Where was God? Isaiah’s promise is that God has no more forgotten Israel than a mother can forget her own child – a rather apt reading for a dedication service.

Israel as a whole was called the Son of God, and yet it seems fatherless. In fact the issue of fatherless children has hit our headlines again this week, as the Church of England and the Evangelical Alliance have attacked a government Bill on human fertilisation and embryology. Churches criticised the decision of MPs to allow single women and lesbian couples to seek IVF treatment without having to consider the need for a father for their children.

"This vote sends a signal that fathers don't matter," it said.

"The Church holds that a child's right not to be deliberately deprived of having a father is greater than any 'right' to a child through IVF.

"We are extremely disappointed that the important role of fathers was not recognised in the bill, and that we now have a situation where the perceived 'right' to have a child trumps the right for a child to be given the best possible start in life."

Now, while we might point out that some children have no choice, the Church of England insists that "There is a huge difference between a child who finds themselves in a single-parent family through bereavement or breakdown of parental relationship, and those who find themselves in this situation by design, for which this bill allows."

It is good, of course, to see Churches engaged politically in this way. But we may be forgiven in thinking that the churches’ response to the bill, was always doomed to failure because it was not nearly radical enough! Overarching the entire debate is an agreement on either side that what really counts here is that humans have rights. So far so good. But at the top of the list is the treasured right for humans to have ‘freedom of choice’. So whose choice is more important? The potential parents, or the potential child. And different sides in the debate opt for different parties: one says the parent’s freedom of choice prevails (they, after all, are the ones who can express themselves), the church – on the other hand, tries commendably to give

voice to the unborn child – by demanding that having a father is the choice any child would make.

But underlying both sides in the debate is a particular understanding of what it means to be human, what it means to be a human being – and today's readings address this question directly. Christians in this debate have argued for one set of morals, and the MPs it seems have argued for another – leaving the church to lament the decay of standards, moral relativism etc. And so the debate highlights that when you allow human rights to form the baseline of an argument, you are bound to get nowhere. Because in a world like ours, no one can decide which human rights are most important, which choices we believe are primary – when there is no agreement over what it means to be human, debates like this will always remain unresolved. The rights of the potential parents, the rights of the unborn child – whoever wins is almost inconsequential. Both sides have already agreed that the human right to freedom of choice is paramount.

Perhaps a more radical way for the church to have a prophetic and political voice here, is to look rather at the way that the entire debate about 'human fertilisation' is framed: It is a question of what it means to be human, and therefore what it means to treat others as human. If freedom of choice is paramount, then it does not take into consideration human relationships with others at all. If we are to love our neighbours as ourselves, then my freedom of choice has severe limits: my freedom to swing my fist ends where your jaw starts.

In fact, it seems to me that the outcome of this debate has long since been determined by name it has been given, which both sides adopt and which betrays a certain view of what it is to be human: the debate is over 'human fertilisation' – sounding very much as though human beings are crops – waiting to be harvested as 'human resources'. Human beings are not beings-in-relationship, they are individual entities who may choose to have others around them, who may choose to be in certain relationships, who may choose to relate to others in a certain way. But individualism has framed the entire debate. A more radical response to these kinds of questions is suggested by today's readings:

Forgotten by God

God's people, according to Isaiah, have found themselves feeling that they are without a Father. All that had been promised to them is lost. All that they had hoped for is lost. Their freedom of choice, is lost. Last night, six year old Lewis led the Lord's prayer in our house, and he stumbled into his own particular version. This time, it was not Alice 'lead us not into ... heaven'. It was Lewis, praying 'deliver us from ... the power and the glory, Amen'. That is a fitting prayer given the frame of the human fertilisation debate – in which the human individual is sovereign, the human self is King, in which man is the measure of all things, in which power and glory are almost perceived as human rights. Deliver us from the power and the glory

But it's also a description of what had happened to those who first heard Isaiah's words: they could not have been further from the experience of power or glory. Their faith, their land, and their hopes were desolate, powerless and full of shame. Deliver from the power and the glory seems to be precisely the unhappy prayer that God had answered.

But this remains precisely the exhortation of Jesus in our Gospel reading: in the midst of worry, and suffering and uncertainty, we are called to 'seek first his Kingdom, and his

justice'. This is very different from making human rights the heart of human identity. But it also sounds a little bit piously idealistic: If our lives are in ruins, if we are swamped by grief, if we are having to take one day at a time, then being told not to worry can seem infuriating. It might turn us into Mr Mcawber – the character from David Copperfield, whose life was always a mess, but who always believed that something would come up!

Well, the kind of worry here, is the sort that causes sleepless nights – the kind of things that worry us that in reality have no claim on those who seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness. What we will eat and drink and wear shape so much of who we are and what we do today. They are just examples, but thoroughly appropriate for a world where freedom of choice for the individual is the baseline of any argument. May God deliver us from the power and the glory of individualistic freedom of choice. Precisely this kind of reasoning and behaviour is reeking havoc in our world today.

May we seek first his Kingdom and his justice. This, rather than the rights of individual humans that no one can agree on anyway, is the basis for an ethics of justice. To seek for God's kingship to be established in our lives, and God's justice to be established in our world. Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.

Of course, our world, the media, its victims and our peers, encourage us constantly, consciously or unconsciously, to chase after what every pagan is chasing after – to sieze upon our right for choice. But with that quest for our own satisfaction, in our quest for power and glory, we end up more worried than ever – as Jesus has warned – worried about how we will look, about our diet, about how we will pay off the credit card on which we've just overspent on a new car, worried about what would happen if we scratched it. Deliver us from the power and the glory, may we seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness – and a humanly fulfilling satisfaction will come along the way.

Our relationship with God, and our relationship with others is what, after all, we are celebrating today. The gift of a new life, and the dedication of this new life to God, implicates not only the immediate family but all within the church community, to the care of Lucy. But it also displays and demands from us, an alternative way of living. One in which we believe every human being is a child of God – and, therefore, one in which the needs of others eclipses any claims for our own human rights. If there is an ethic for the Kingdom of God, that is it.

Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness – that is, to seek God's kingship to be established in our life, a God who does not forget or abandon us – even though our experience may at times suggest that he has. This is the God we call Father, a father who does not abandon or ignore his children.

And his righteousness, that is, his justice – to embody the community where God's justice is seen and felt to be at work, a community that then has a prophetic voice to call for a justice that relatives altogether a justice based on freedom of individual choice, because its baseline is fairness for all people.

Deliver us from individualistic power and glory

Free us to seek first your Kingdom and your righteousness

Do not forsake us, nor abandon us, but lead us into you – that all our other concerns may evaporate in our devotion to you and to others. Amen