



## Harvest Festival, Year B – October 11, 2009

Matthew 6.25-33

### A Homily preached by the Rev'd Canon M. Ansley Tucker

Question: What is the opposite of thankfulness? of gratitude?

Would you say, ingratitude? a sense of entitlement? a spirit of criticism?

I might have chosen any of these. But the compilers of our lectionary have sent us in a different direction. For here it is, a national day of Thanksgiving, and the gospel they have put before us is all about "worry." "Therefore, I tell you," says Jesus, "do not worry about your life, saying 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'... "Which of you, by worrying, can add a single hour to your life?" In other words, the very fact that we are counseled against worry on this day, of all days, encourages us to see worry as an opposite of thankfulness.

And maybe we're on to something here! For what does give rise to worry? I would say it is either scarcity, or the threat of scarcity. What if the rain doesn't come? What if natural gas stays low? What if I lose my job? What if my pension isn't big enough? What if there isn't water or food enough for all? In other words, "What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?"

Even (please God) as we verge on emerging from this Recession, I dare say that most of us have flirted, and some of us have downright courted, a spirit of worry and fear.

Worry has a way of working itself out in our daily lives. Pastoral theologians call this "a theology of scarcity." When we operate from a theology of scarcity, we tend to protect our assets, to live mean little lives, hoarding whatever goods have come our way, for fear that even though we need them now, we might need them more later. A theology of scarcity is risk averse – it can never dare to invest in a dream. It lives all of life like the man who wrapped his only talent in a handkerchief, and buried it for safekeeping. It goes without saying that those who live from an attitude of scarcity aren't going to be giving anything away.

But here you may protest that I have overpainted my subject, and have vilified the virtue of prudence. Prudence is indeed a virtue, but (as Aristotle taught us) any virtue run amok is no longer good, but bad. Surely we recognize that an attitude of scarcity is not the sole preserve of hard times. Many of us, even at the peak of well being and prosperity, will behave as if we actually needed to put walls around our time, our favours, our money, our energy, even our good reputations. This is not prudence, but fearful, self-interested, miserliness.

Now, set this next to what has been called a "theology of abundance." – a profoundly "unworried" approach to life. Now here is the lynchpin in this whole comparison. For, just as one can live from a posture of scarcity in a time of prosperity, so can one live "abundantly" in a time of scarcity – even when the going is rough, that is.

I need to insert a contextual note, before we go on, however, because the idea of a theology of abundance has been egregiously perverted in some circles. So let me tell you what I do *not* mean. I do not mean that abundance is a synonym for prosperity, and that prosperity is a sign of divine favour – or even worse, of divine right, or entitlement. This gospel of prosperity is preached in any number of ways –

and while it may look good on the surface, its underbelly is an assault not only on common sense, but on the goodness of God. Believe in God, they say, and God will bless you. If you are doing God's will, things will go well for you. This sounds safe enough, but it's only a short distance to the inverse: if things are going well for you, you must be doing God's will. Really? And how about this? -- If things are *not* going well for you, you must *not* be doing God' will. Let's tell that to Nelson Mandela. For that matter, let's tell it to Jesus! Do you see the perils of a theology of abundance as it is often preached?

So if this is not what I mean by a theology of abundance, what do I mean? Once again, we must turn to the gospel reading. What do we find there?

First, Jesus says, Do not worry (that is, do not live from an attitude of scarcity): Look! Look at the lilies of the field. Look at the birds of the air. Look around you, people. For once. Yes, yes, I know it is the old saw about counting your blessings, about how the glass is half full rather than half empty. But it's true, you know. It is what is *in* the glass, the fullness, not what is *not* in the glass (the emptiness) that will do you good. A theology of abundance will take root only once we are aware of just how *giving* the earth, our friends, and our God really are.

It isn't about worthiness. It isn't about going out there and *getting* what we want and need. In fact, Jesus abhors the "striving" of the Gentiles, this attitude that it's every man for himself, and the guy who dies with the most toys wins. That sounds like abundance, but in reality it is to live one's life from a posture of scarcity.

Jesus envisages rather a spirit of trust and dependence – which is the very opposite of striving, and worry. Abundance will prevail if we dig up our only talent, dust it off, and share it. Abundance will prevail if we can be depended upon to share when we have more than we need. Abundance will prevail, that is, when we are as dependable as we are dependent. A theology of abundance is therefore not so much about the lavish life (what we can get for ourselves), as it is about simplicity of life (what we are willing to give, or willing to give up). So that none need worry.

And it is in the relinquishment of worry, that we are able to be grateful. It is in the relinquishment of worry that we are able to *give* thanks.