



Second Sunday before Lent
Sunday 27 February 2011

Consider the lilies

A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Readings: Romans 8.18-25; Matthew 6.25-end

There is a painting called 'Consider the lilies'¹ in Stanley Spencer's *Christ in the Wilderness*, originally planned as a daily series for Lent. In each of these pieces he has Christ completely at one with the landscape around him. It is not the figure of Christ you would expect. He is rather large and rounded and a bit dishevelled. In this picture his bulky frame mirrors the hills behind him as he crouches forward in the grass, on his hands and knees, looking down not at lilies but daisies, the daisy-chain kind that would have been found in Spencer's home village of Cookham - white with yellow centres, the tips of petals of these ones in the foreground, tinged with red. He is totally absorbed in these flowers, very present and engaged in the experience of this particular day. Christ contemplates the daisies – the beauty of God. And it seems that the daisies contemplate him – the love of God. Christ and creation, a mutual regard of love and wonder. A wonderful image for today this second Sunday before Lent which is often taken as Creation Sunday.

Contrast that image with some of the experiences of this week. Of the effects of the power of nature as the people of Christchurch in New Zealand have had to cope with the devastation of the earthquake, caught up not in wonder but in disbelief and shock at the loss of loved ones and homes and workplaces, at lunchtime in the heart of a busy city, like this one, on an ordinary Tuesday. Continuing scenes too of the upheaval and turmoil in communities and countries across the Arab world, in North Africa and the Middle East, as real hope for tomorrow is bringing about turmoil and uncertain lives today. Especially we remember Libya with the scenes of disorder these last few days. If we had to think of images of creation groaning, these might describe it very well.

Day by day we share in what Paul describes as the groaning and labour pains of God's world, its life and community. Yet deep within us is that yearning and call to be and reflect the image of God and to recognise it in the created order and in one another; to look at the world and to find the goodness of God within it, like that image of Christ at one with and contemplating creation in a wilderness place; like the stories of hope and kindness and care in Christchurch in amidst the rubble. We live with that tension and struggle.

The way through that Paul calls us to in his letter to the Romans is to live our lives in hope, very much connected to the reality of the world around us but aware of God's spirit, the life of Christ, dwelling within us and the hope and life and freedom that he calls us to. It is a spirit that calls out of us 'what we are really made for' and asks us to share this generously with the world. This kind of awareness and living connects us to the future God longs for us and brings us freedom. Living in the way God intends for us, the way that Christ opens for us, makes a difference to our world and to those around us.

Those that are involved in the healing ministry here at St Martin's met this week to explore our work and see how we might develop it in the future. This ministry involves us in God's work of bringing freedom, and restoration, about giving space for people to connect to the image of God within them. It is the loving focus and prayerful attention, including the importance of touch that

¹ *Consider the lilies*, Stanley Spencer 1939

http://www.artgallery.wa.gov.au/collections/documents/spencer_conv.pdf

was felt to be at the heart of the experience. Like that loving gaze of Christ in the wilderness. This ministry allows those that receive it to be aware of this in their own lives.

At some level this ministry also connects us to the healing of our communities, our world and of creation; connects us to God *as we are*, with the tensions and struggles we and those we love face - illness and suffering, the groanings of our own lives. It deepens our life with God here and so helps to shape and direct all our activity. It makes us as a community and individuals more able to reflect the image of God into the world, as we seek his kingdom in our own lives and in one another; seek the freedom as Paul puts it 'of the glory of the children of God'. The ones he gazes upon and loves.

This work of healing also communicates to the places of anxiety within us and around us the words that Jesus speaks in our Gospel today 'don't worry about your life'. These words root us in our daily lives, encourage us to be attentive to each day, to each other, to the here and now. They follow not long after Jesus teaches the disciples the words of the Lord's Prayer, where they are to ask for daily bread, to take one day at a time and see the goodness and provision in it.

Jesus is trying to teach them, not that they should give up planning, or their responsibility for the future or for their lives, but that by directing their attention to the things of each day, which may be its struggles and troubles, its delight, its creativity, its boredom, makes them more aware of God with them, his presence in their lives and their dependence upon him. He calls them to become aware of the simple state of being that birds, lilies and all of creation mirror for us.

If we stop and allow our focus to shift from a continual living forward into the future and let our attention settle on each day, we will become aware of the loving gaze of God upon us. With us in all we are facing. Helping us overcome our fears and worries and concerns and so make us more able to live hopefully into the future; setting us free to life with him, the life of the kingdom, very present and very much part of our future.

In the few days I spent recently in Croatia for the funeral of my father in law Eugen, I had a glimpse of what this living in the present might mean. There were some wonderful glimpses of the goodness of his everyday life. There was an article written by friends in the local coastal paper about the time in the 1960's when their water polo team won the national championships. These same lifelong friends now in their 70's helped to carry his coffin to his final resting place, looking out over the sea.

They shared with us memories of friendship – fishing together, local sport, and village life. It was in their small knowing gestures and words that we could recognise life and love and hope and the person we knew, who loved this village and these people. He was someone who really did connect to what he really was made for. The attention he had paid to ordinary life, to the people around him, was a gift not just for then but for the future. Not just memories from the past, not just comforting words for the present, but signs of hope, that will stay with his friends and with us.

Jesus invites us to *consider* the things around us this day. The things that worry us, that delight us, that make up our friendships and relationships. Invites us to allow God to clothe us with his care and attention.

And then he invites us to return the gaze. And that begins to set us and his creation free.