

PENTECOST 2A, 25/5/08, WESLEY 9.00 AND 10.30

Don't worry! Don't be anxious!

Yet we do, all too often. Are we going to succeed? Do we measure up to what others around us seem to think is important?

When I was starting to think about this sermon, I heard a song from 1970 on the radio. It was Janis Joplin singing her song Mercedes Benz. She meant it as a criticism of the materialism of so many around her. The words sung in her powerful voice still carry a punch – just substitute plasma TV for Colour TV.

She starts : "O Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?"

Her mock prayer goes on to ask God for a colour TV and a night on the town.

Do we think we can ask God for things that will help us to look good in the eyes of our contemporaries?

We get anxious about the things that are important to us. Jesus understood that very well. In the few verses before today's reading he said "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also".

Listen again to that last bit: For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

A few more verses and he said "no one can serve two masters .... You cannot serve God and wealth". Some translations use the Aramaic word 'mammon', meaning money and possessions.

The theologian, Paul Tillich spoke in terms of our Ultimate Concern as being our god. For some people, the thing of greatest importance in their lives, their ultimate concern, is their wealth or status. Families can come a poor second to the big business deal or working a second job to be able to afford more and bigger things. Some people can even convince themselves that they are working to buy extra things for the family. They are forgetting that by doing so, they're missing out on the most valuable gift of all, their own time with the family. Matters of the spirit come well down the list for such people.

Of course, Jesus didn't mean don't bother about food or clothing or shelter. We do have to plan for those things. When natural disasters happen, we give to appeals so that the necessities of life can be given to those who are suffering. Abject poverty and destitution are terrible and we need to do all we can to overcome them. More than that, Jesus wasn't opposed to us enjoying our lives. He used the examples of flowers and birds and how beautiful they can be. Why didn't he talk about the more mundane earthworms and tree bark? They are vital parts of our ecosystems. No, he was interested in giving examples of beauty and joy. God created this wonderful world and we should

enjoy it. Take time to get to know the natural and made world. Give thanks to God for it.

So what rules our lives? We can't serve two masters. We can't have two things of ultimate concern – that is impossible by definition. Do we choose to put possessions at the top of our priorities with all the worry that goes with them? Do we then build homes with increased security, pay higher insurance premiums, keep a watch on the market values, deciding when to sell and when to buy something else. Do we worry about the tax effect of our actions. You know how it works.

A friend said something like: “my spouse and I have a very good income but we are spending all we earn. After all, we have to be able to holiday at that special resort, we have to have more and better clothes to attend all the different work functions and social events. Then the children are doing well at studies but John is overseas for his gap year – all his friends are too, its what they do. And it seems every time he contacts us he needs more money. Jane's year 12 formal dress will have to be bought in Sydney because she wants something others haven't seen.” Don't laugh about it. People have really said those things. So, maybe you say, Oh I'm ok then because I don't have that sort of money. But even if you make the year 12 dress yourself, if that is the most important thing in your life, then you are not putting God first. If you are overcome with jealousy for those who have more than you, if you think that all would be right in your life if only you could have a nice new macmansion house or a bigger plasma TV, then your are not putting God first. And do you know what happens when you get the plasma TV? Then you realise that you need an extra computer so that you don't have to share with the kids. And then it is something else ... And the worry that comes with it all escalates.

From the very early years of Christianity, people have struggled with the idea of being free from the standards of society. Of living life in such a way that we don't need to be anxious or worried about whether we're wearing the right brand of clothes, driving the fashionable car or eating at the best restaurant. We can be free from all of that. Sure, we still want to enjoy our life, to know what we think is beautiful, to create top quality things. After all we live in the world God created, the world that contains so much beauty, in flowers and birds, animals and trees and rocks. Hair shirts, or sackcloth and ashes are not what God wants. Remember the parable of the Prodigal son. When the son returned, his father clothed him in the best cloak, put sandals on his feet and turned on a feast. So style, beauty, good food, yes – but not as our main aim in life. We are to enjoy life in response to God's goodness to us – not instead of it.

Jesus says to put God first. There is no worry when we put God first. I mean truly put God first – not trying to be the most pious person in your home fellowship group. That is still worrying about society's standards. Does God really care about it? Remember how Jesus said not to be like the hypocrites who pray where all can see how much they pray but, rather, to pray in secret.

God is not finite. God's love and care go on forever. We can turn our backs on God, we can get caught up in the day to day cares of life. But God is still there patiently waiting for us.

Jesus said to strive first for the Kingdom of God. Strive for it. Don't just sit back thinking it will happen if we think holy thoughts. The world doesn't work that way. We are asked to seek and strive for the Kingdom of God. We need to work hard to ensure that there are birds and flowers for future generations to marvel at. We need to know as much of God's creation as we can. We need to give to others, not out of our spare cash but generously. We need to work to end systemic causes of injustice.

Do you know what this adds up to? It adds up to not worrying about how we rate by society's standards – that means a great freedom to live life to the full in the service of God. This is not an onerous responsibility. In our everyday human way, when we love family members we think of their needs; we want to do what will benefit them - even more so when we love God and Jesus. When we place them first in our priorities, other things are not so important.

Even so, it takes courage to be different, to not worry about the things society considers important. We could live our lives in a different way – but what would other people say? That's the problem isn't it? It doesn't matter what other people say and if we think it does, then we're not really putting God first.

The sixth century philosopher, Boethius, influenced many early Christian leaders. He contemplated misfortune while in prison awaiting execution and wrote down his thoughts. He concluded that we are meant for happiness but not happiness based on material things – rather a happiness that is a detached, serene contentment, a consolation that the world's wrong cannot thwart. The freedom Jesus offers is this.

The freedom and contentment we can all have when we put the love of God as our first priority, our ultimate concern, is this. If we can, then we are free of society's standards. We could follow the way Jesus taught us. Can we? In the love of Christ, Amen.