

“Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things”

The collect for today begins, “Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things.” It seems to me that this advice comes right on cue here at St. Barnabas. It has been, after all, a year of serious anxiety. This week marks the anniversary of the fall of Lehman Brothers, the first domino to send the whole game tumbling down. And it feels to me, much, much longer than a year. And even with the news that things are easing, Mr Bernanke saying very softly that “it is likely” the recession is over – and we’ll take anything, right? – but it still feels like we’re right in the midst of the anxiety. Not only are we dealing with the realities of the economic struggle, but right in the throes of it Father Hubbard decides to leave after almost 25 years. That is a big deal. Church is, after all, the place we can rely upon to bring OUR trouble, OUR woes, not to be the cause of them.

Jesus’ disciples are also anxious about earthly things in today’s Gospel. Jesus has just told them that he will be arrested, tried, crucified, and will rise again. They don’t quite get it...they can’t quite grasp what he is saying to them. How could they really? How could Jesus know about all these things anyway? And just like us they are afraid to ask any questions. Except for the unspoken one in their hearts – which is, “What’s going to happen to us? Who will be in charge? So, they start to squabble about it. Who is the best? Who is the greatest? When Jesus asks them what they have been arguing about, the silence is deafening. Teachers know this well – so do parents. “Who did what?” we ask, and there is deafening silence. To tell him would be crass would be to admit how crass they are being. One can imagine them, shifting uneasily from foot to foot, looking at the floor.

Jockeying for position; fighting out who is best is the stuff of families and of the classroom, and at the root of it is the stuff of human survival. Consider “Lord of The Flies,” (yes, we old ones had to read it in school as well). They are anxious after all, about earthly things. What comes next, who is in charge, is a very natural anxiety. These concerns will happen again for the disciples before they’re done and have been a feature of the Church always. Listen to James: *“For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.”*

Jesus gently chides them and turns their arguing on its head: *“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”* Then, just like the teacher, he gives them an example, gathering a small child to him, cradling it on his knee. He tells them that when they embrace a little one, like he is doing now, they will be like him and, what’s more, like one from whom he comes, God. *“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”*

It’s hard to get at first read but the image helps. Jesus is cradling a child, as a loving parent does. Those of us who have cradled a little child know the sense of protectiveness, of unconditional love that suffuses us. Jesus is teaching us that when we experience that depth of love, that

softening of ourselves, that is when we are able to welcome Christ within ourselves. This feeling of love pouring into and out of us is perhaps the closest we can ever come to understanding the love that Christ, and by extension God, has for us. Only then, in this way, can we lead in his name. Jesus is describing the source of great power. There is no power greater than love. He is asking his disciples to let go of their ideas of earthly power, to open up to the real power; the embrace of love that is God.

This Gospel has profound meaning for us here today. For we at one and the same time both the child who is enfolded in Christ's arms, and in His name, the arms of love that extend to welcome all who come to this place. Our God yearns to hold and cradle each one of us, especially when we are anxious about earthly things. Maybe we need to remind ourselves to trust in him and not be worried about earthly things.

My home church in England was consecrated in 990. Yes, do the math. We celebrated its thousandth birthday in 1990. One of the special things in that church that has always given me a sense of perspective was a list of the rectors, curates and assistants that stretches back to about the 1400's. There are a lot of names. They have come and they have gone, but that church is still alive and vibrant, just as it has been through wars and fires, plagues and famines. This church has been around since 1872. Pastors have come and gone, there have been wars and fires, feasts and famine and you have survived many earthly anxieties.

Just like the disciples today, our earthly anxieties cause us to want a quick fix. We want to get back to normal as quickly as possible. Today we are being called to do something greater, to stand back, to be patient, to trust. Father Hubbard discerned a call to something different, to grow in a different way after almost 25 years. So, too, is this parish invited to take the opportunity to grow. When a church has had a long pastorate it needs time to regroup and redefine who it is and what God may be calling it to become. Only then will the discernment committee be able to seek a new priest with the right skills and gifts. Where we are now is normal, because life is organic and dynamic. The creation continues to make and remake itself constantly and we, St Barnabas, are part of that process.

As this unfolds we need to remember that we are enfolded in Christ's arms, for solace and comfort, and it's a good place to be. We have nothing to fear. We are on a journey, St Barnabas, we always have been and we have never travelled alone.

The Rev. Sheelagh A. Clarke

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
Monmouth Junction, NJ