

BUT CAN WE LIVE ON ROAST LILIES?

a sermon praught by the Rev'd Dr Richard Major
to the Anglican church in Zagreb
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Genesis i¹-ii³; Psalm cxxxvi^{1-9, 23-26}; Romans viii¹⁸⁻²⁵; Matthew vi²⁵⁻³⁴.

From the Gospel:



*Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink. ...
Consider the lilies of the field.*

In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost: Amen.

The Holy Gospel

THEREFORE I TELL YOU, DO NOT WORRY about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.



LET US CONSIDER LILIES. It's a straightforward command we've received in this evening's Gospel], and it's a good idea to act on straightforward commands, especially when they come from Christ]. We have been ordered to consider the lilies of the field, to stare at them and ponder. So let's regard this particular lily, which cost me two euros yesterday afternoon, and is now lighting up our altar.

Why does it exist? Because God made it, and then pointed to it, crying Here! Look at this! Consider the lily. Here in this flower is truth, everlasting and limitless. What does it tell us about God?

Well, what do we see when we consider this lily? It is deliciously soft. It is smooth to the touch. The bits of it that aren't creamy are gilded. It is extravagantly and boldly designed. It is vividly intricate, fleshily beautiful. It suggests languor and impractical splendour. [More than most flowers, lilies are clearly lovely instruments for the merry deed of kind. They're an obvious symbol of pleasure, even a symbol of voluptuous pleasure, of the ease and pleasures of love. That's what the lily naturally suggests to the human eye. That's why lilies crop up at weddings: they're white and pure, erotic and delectable, all at once.]

That's certainly what lilies suggested to the ancient Jewish eye. The lily was adopted as his symbol by King Solomon: Solomon the lily-king, young, beautiful, carefree, fortunate, proverbially wealthy and sensual, with his seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines,¹ his perfumed beard dyed crimson as an orchid, his robes of cloth-of-gold the colour of anemones flowing down the twelve creamy marble steps of his throne, his bejewelled peacock throne. That's what Solomon was like: the last word in human loveliness. And yet Solomon [– who was no fool, and is even said to have been a botanist² –] was awed by the lily. He made it his symbol because he could see that the lily was even more lushly glorious than he was himself. The lily was richer even than the great king. It was even more at its ease. The lily of the field was even more voluptuous than Solomon in his alabaster palace.

[When Solomon wrote love poetry and wanted invoke an atmosphere of deep erotic delight, he spoke of lilies. In the Canticle of Canticles Solomon likens his mistress' breasts to two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies – *qui pascuntur in liliis* – and he praises her belly as *sicut acervus tritici vallatus liliis*, a heap of wheat set about with lilies. He has her call herself the lily of the valleys, *lilium convallium*. *As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters*. He has her say of him his lips are *like lilies, dropping sweet smelling myrrh*; and gives her this splendid image for the act of love: *Dilectus meus mihi, et ego illi, qui pascitur inter lilia: My beloved is mine, and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies*.³

And]when Solomon came to build the Temple in Jerusalem, he decorated it with a motif of lilies and pomegranates, massively carved and gilded: sensual flower and sensual fruit clustered together about the Holy of Holies. When a Jew approached his God in Solomon's Temple, he

¹ I Kings xi³.

² *He spake of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall*: I Kings iv³³.

³ Song of Songs iv⁵, vii², ii¹⁷, v¹³, ii¹⁶.

approached Him through a thicket of lilies. *Dilectus meus mihi, et ego illi, qui pascitur inter lilia.*⁴

[Lilies are lush and pure, voluptuous, intense. If the first Temple raised to the One God was a Temple made of massive stone lilies, four foot across and radiant with gold-leaf, what does that suggest about proper worship of the One God? If the most intense thing the Church wants to say to Christ is the ecstatic cry, *My beloved is mine, and I am His: He feedeth among the lilies*, what does that tell us about the Church?]

Solomon's Temple was destroyed. But every spring the hills were still magnificent with Solomon's flower, and one spring day a thousand years after Solomon, his descendent and heir climbed a shallow hill, seated Himself among the wildflowers, and began to teach. He laid out a scheme of how to live. This speech is the basis of Christian ethics. We have been hearing it each Sunday for the last few weeks. It is usually called the Sermon on the Mount, but there are no mountains in Galilee, and perhaps we would do better to call it the Sermon amongst the Wildflowers. After all, the Sermon on the Mount does not mention the mount; but it does, at its climax, in this evenign's reading, draw attention to the immediate scenery. *Consider the lilies of the field*, cries Christ suddenly, plucking, I should think, a lily and flourishing it at His listeners. *Even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.*

Here is the pinnacle of Christian ethics: the human God enthroned on a hillside, sceptred with a gold-white lily. When a Christian approaches his God, he approaches Him through a thicket of delectable blooms, swaying in the sun and lakeside breeze.

*Consider the lilies of the field,
how they grow;
they toil not,
neither do they spin:
And yet I say unto you,
that even Solomon
in all his glory
was not arrayed like one of these.*

And yet I say unto you – it's very insistent. Christ is forcing us from our usual tepid admiration of flowers to awe at their nature. He is confronting us with the amazing voluptuousness of the lily – to which He is just as sensitive as His ancestor Solomon. The lily doesn't toil or spin: a lily doesn't have a job or run a bank account, it doesn't sew its clothes or wash them or darn them or iron them, and yet look at it! Look what it looks like! Consider it!

Given the voluptuous ease and carelessness of the lily of the field, given its luxury and ostentatious glory and so forth, a modern puritan might expect Christ to have words against it. But not a bit of it. Christ's point is precise and clear and specific. Live more like a lily. Stop worrying so much, He says: be happy: consider the lilies, and remember how much like them you are. You are to consider the lilies of the field because you are to model yourselves on lilies of the field. You are

⁴ I Kings vii¹⁹⁻²⁶: the 'lily-work' column must have looded like the acanthuses in the GreekCorinthian order.

to consider the lilies of the field to realise what you are: you are even more lilaceous, if you like, than lilies are themselves.

Why? Because God loves you, and made you to take delight in being alive. The astonishing fact of being alive matters more than any work or wealth or authority you might wrap about yourself. All that is decoration. *Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?* Isn't your existence as a human more than how you deck your human life, whether it be with money, or authority, or raiment from boutiques? God is your Father, so be free of care. Take no thought for your life. Be carefree: stop brooding so earnestly on prospects or income or standing. Your glory as a creation of God is as great as the royal glory of sensual Solomon the King; for created things exceed any invented human splendour just by existing. *Consider the lilies of the field, exult in their existence, and in yours. Stop pining after the externals, the mere clothing of life – if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven . . . ?*

After all, why let the busy endlessness of spending and getting devour your heart? You don't have as much control over your life as you pretend; all this frantic acquisition and anxious hoarding is out of proportion –

*Behold the fowls of the air:
for they sow not,
neither do they reap,
nor gather into barns;
yet your heavenly Father
feedeth them.
Are ye not much better than they?*

Aren't you embarrassed to be more nervous than a bird? What good can such worrying do? *Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?* – a witticism that makes us wonder whether JESUS was Himself unusually tall, or unusually short: which?



WHEN I FIRST HEARD THIS GOSPEL, as a child, I assumed the lilies of the field were being packed into the oven to be roasted and eaten. And I was not impressed. The Sermon on the Mount, I decided, was not practical. I for one was not going to survive on roast lilies. *Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink. ... Consider the lilies of the field.* That was silly. I couldn't stop worrying about eating and drinking, being clothed, and all that side of life. I spurned the flowers of the field.

(Someone might have explained to me that the wildflowers weren't being put into the oven to be cooked, but to be burned. It's still the custom in the Near East to cut the meadow grasses, which quickly dry out in the hideous heat, and can be used for fuel. Wild lilies are caught up in this general incineration of the wild grass. No one actually eats roasted lilies.)⁵

But obviously that doesn't solve the problem. Isn't the Sermon on the Mount, Christ's sermon amidst wildflowers, about wildflowers, just soft or silly? Isn't it make-believe and escapism?

Well, no. When JESUS pointed out how flower-like human life should be, He was well on His way to crucifixion, and knew it. This easy-going joy at being alive was hard work for Him: it must have been the product of a steady struggle against despair.

Half a century ago the world sighed over the antics of the hippies, middle-class brats supported by their much-abused mummies and daddies. As soon as the parental money ran out they stopped making daisy-chains and went back to clothes, soap and suburban careers. They were soft and silly. But Christ's flower Sermon had nothing to do with the flower-children.

The flowers and birds of His Sermon are serious creatures. They have their work to do. They live in a dangerous world where there is every possibility of a bird's starving to death, where anyway life is short. The glowing flower can expect to be shoved into The world can be harsh to us. Indeed the world in a sense is necessarily harsh to us. Even if we flourish and dazzle like a wild lily, we go into the oven tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, or sixty years from now – only the bat of an eyelid.

So what are we to do? We have our work to do, and we must do it. We must plan carefully what needs to be planned. But we do not let such things possess us. We do not let them devour our hearts. On Judgement Day no one is going to congratulate us on the amount of overtime we put in, how fanatically well we ironed our tea-towels, how chic we looked at parties. Mention these accomplishments, and the recording angel will gasp: *But how did you find the time? Why weren't you looking at the wildflowers?*

In the face of fate, which we cannot control, and death, which we cannot prevent, the most serious, consistent, mature possible attitude is this: light-hearted delight at being alive. That is the

⁵ Although the Chinese have a soup, *kaeng chud noon*, made from the three-inch, golden, stringy dried buds of the tiger lilies (*lilium lancifolium*): <http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1926,150161-237200,00.html>. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edible_flowers Oddly enough, lilies are deadly for cats: they only have to brush against a stem, let alone chew a petal, to go into renal shock. See, if you are at a loose end, <http://www.suite101.com/content/lilies-poisonous-to-cats-a17587#ixzz1Efaml0T0>

most solemn of all philosophies, for it acknowledges every dreadfulness heaped up on our existence like smouldering torturing coals; yet it still has courage to plunge into that heap and bring out the thing that matters most: a lily, unscorched, uncrushed – symbol of the glorious and inexplicable fact of being alive, of having been created. That’s what is most true.

And therefore the profoundest human emotion is astonished joy. Carefree gratitude, voluptuous ease at life: that’s the mature attitude. It’s the beetle-browed worriers who are being trivial. It’s the fretful people who are being silly: they’re letting petty cares distract them from larger issues. We Christians spend so much of our time considering the lilies of the field not because we’re frivolous, but because we are not frivolous.

To be light-hearted on this scale is not a light matter. To recover our childhood good-sense and innocence is an formidable strain. To be heroically easy-going, and happy as you can, as brim-full of pleasure, as healthily voluptuous, is sometimes a hard duty – but it is still a duty, both because it is the only mature attitude to life; and because it is a positive command of Christ.

The heart of the Christian faith is pleasure. That’s worth remembering as we prepare for the necessary, useful discipline of Lent. The real spirit of Christianity is voluptuous: *in Thy presence is fulness of joy*, sings the Psalmist to his God: *and at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.*⁶



IN THIS ANXIOUS AGE we don’t hear much about the human duty to be easy-going. So let us insist on it. Christianity is a pleasure-seeking faith. It is a religion of intelligent indulgence. It is sensual. It declares all creation to be allowed – nothing is intrinsically bad, everything is *kosher*, there are no taboos. Christ dared to say *behold, all things are clean unto you*,⁷ and the Faith of Christ is the only major world religion which does not symbolise its discontent with matter by arbitrary renunciations – of pork, of beef, of beer, of foreskins. For Christianity is the religion of *in-*

⁶ Psalm xvi¹².

⁷ Luke xi⁴¹.

carnation – going-*into*-flesh as pivot of divine purpose. It is therefore the religion of uncircumcision – as our Epistle explained, not because uncircumcision is itself a renunciation, but because the Christian is a ‘new creature’, entirely free of these restless denials of the physical.⁸ Christ commands us to be at home in the cosmos, as at home as the flowers: to stop worrying and be happy. Christianity’s laws are only strictly moral concerns – to do with avoiding damage. *All things are lawful . . . but all things are not expedient.*⁹ Apart from such expediency, we are as unbound and blameless as tulips. Christianity’s Lents, its austerities and asceticisms and fasts and penances, are all on the surface, local oddities caused by odd local conditions.

People, even Christians themselves, mistake the severity sometimes necessary as we struggle against ourselves as the essence of the Faith. That’s not true. Pleasure leads us where we go; at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore. God invented pleasure and approves of it.

Of course, nothing in this life is entirely safe, everything is liable to abuse, and it is possible for multiplied pleasures to make human beings shallow and selfish. It is possible. But as a matter of fact in this age (and what other age is of practical concern?) it is rare. In our age, the worst temptations are from the other flank: temptations to do with neglecting the lilies, temptations of excessive grimness, excessive caution, excessive work, excessive submission to the system. Thoughtless hedonism is not usual amongst us. The errors of our era have mainly to do with joylessness, and, therefore, morbid overwork (and incidentally, with not sleeping enough). We are plagued by anorexia, not gross overeating, and with formless thudding melancholy; not with brutal high spirits. That’s why we don’t hear much praise of pleasure in this epoch. That’s why pleasure makes us anxious, so that we want to discover new carcinogens in chocolate cake and cigars and sunbathing. It’s not unworldliness lingering from the Catholic Middle Ages that leads us to distrust delight.

What makes us ignore the principle of pleasure is the new severity of capitalism. Late Capitalism is our master, and it wants us to rush about in a haze of anxiety, muttering to ourselves like a mantra – What shall we eat? What shall we drink? Wherewithal shall we be clothed? – What therapy shall I have? What social signals should I send? The advertisements scream nothing else at us. Nothing annoys the system more than to see a man comfortably considering the lilies, because it can’t get such a man to worry enough or consume enough or work enough (. . . *after all these things do the Gentiles seek*). He has chosen the good Creator-God as his master, and Mammon can’t get its talons into him.

Mammon is usually translated as ‘money’, but that’s not right: Mammon means worldliness, a consuming concern with consuming, with getting and spending. No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. In the end, we are loyal either to Creation, or to the gritty, grasping human societies in which we find ourselves. We are either voluptuous, or worldly;

⁸ Galatians vi^{14b-16a}: *in the cross of our Lord JESUS Christ . . . the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world. For in Christ JESUS neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them . . .*

⁹ I Corinthians vi¹².

on the side of the lilies, or on the side of the coinage. One or the other. If we try to mix our loyalties and serve both, we will secretly love the world, and hate God for distracting us and making inparctical demands; or, more probably, we'll hold to the hard cold world and despise God – classically, by turning up in church to patronise Him. That's a mistake.

There's nothing wrong with being well-dressed or industrious, nothing wrong with the capitalist system. It's the task of an economic system to work well – which it after all does – and our human task to live well and humanly within it. It's the donkey's job to carry us, and not his fault if we let ourselves become dim as a donkey. The problem is not that consumer capitalism exists, but that we let it consume us. The problem is not that worldly delights exist in our lives, but that they become our lives and stop being delightful. We fail to deal with them lightly enough. We let them devour our hearts. And where's our light-hearted joy then?



CONSIDERATE LILLA AGRI, QUOMODO CRESCUNT: CONSIDER THE LILIES OF THE FIELD – not a bad motto, that, should we ever have to choose a motto.

Lilies are emblems of untroubled pleasure in life. Nothing is more fitting for Christians than to gaze on lilies, since we are as free as they are. We are, like them, more fortunate than Solomon, more glorious than Solomon. For we co-heirs of the joyous Christ, at Whose right hand are pleasures for evermore.

Alleluia, alleluia!
Unto God, merciful and splendid,
ever Three, ever One:
to Father, to Son, to Holy Ghost,
be ascribed glory and honour,
power, might, majesty and dominion,
now, and always, and unto the ages of ages:
Amen! Alleluia!



DID CHRIST REALLY MEAN LILIES?

He spoke Aramaic, which is to say dog-Hebrew, and the Hebrew *shushan* is just as vague as the Greek *krinon*: even now Palestinian Arabs, Christ's linguistic heirs (and heirs in oppression) use *susan* to cover anemones, lotuses, tulips, ranunculuses, and so forth.

The Oxford English Dictionary, in its stately fashion, says "The 'lilies of the field' of Matt. vi. 28 have been variously identified with the red *Anemone coronaria* and with the scarlet Martagon or Turk's Cap lily, both of which are common in Galilee." I am very fond of anemones which in the Galilee appear in February and March, before Madonna lilies come up. At left, and on a previous page, are Palestinians anemones.

The Easter lily, *Lilium longiflorum*, is native to the Ryukyu Islands south of Japan, and its prevalence at Easter is a straightforward commercial scam by the nurseries of California, although the legend has duly been invented that the "whiterobed apostle of hope" was first found in the Garden of Gethsemane after Christ's agony, sprung from the drops of His sweat.¹⁰

LILY SYMBOLISM

But in any case, the lily is most apt. *Hayll! lilly lufsome lemyd with llyght* is how JESUS is greeted in the York Mystery plays; for JESUS, the Son of David, was also son and heir of David's son Solomon; and voluptuous, liliaceous King Solomon is a 'type', which means an early draft, of Christ, the ultimate King of Israel and the ultimate lord of delight, with His eternal Temple and His uncountable spouses. The passionate delights of the Song of Solomon are what Christianity is about – not because that poem is an allegory, but because it is not an allegory. The Song is literally about erotic ecstasy, which is an invention of the same Christ who also invented and adores and weds the Church. Because *eros* in the Song of Solomon is literally erotic and vivid, it is adequate as a picture of Man and Christ's mutual delight. Because it is a sign of easy delight, it conjures up Christ, who ends our mawkish dread of the world, makes us at home again, puts us at ease

Because the lily is a sign of sensual delight, it is the symbol of the Virgin, whose virginity (like all Christian virginity) was not contemptuous abnegation of sex, but a special case of transcending mating itself for a partnership and a motherhood even more intimate, more definite, more ecstatic and more yielding. Because in lusty Solomon's Temple, God was approached through a merry porch of enormous lilies, when God at last approached us, He arrived with an angel clutching a sprig of Madonna lilies – at least, that is how mediaval iconography portrays the event: the lily-pot is the prime symbol of the Annunciation. When the Virgin, on behalf of all material Creation, said yes to the Word, the Word came decked with the a nuptial lily of uttermost pleasure.

At right, a Persian miniature of the sermon on the mount, with Madonna lilies at hand.

The lily photos are by Mapplethorpe.
John Singer Sargent's *Carnation Lily Lily Rose* (1886) is in the Tate.



¹⁰ Nestle-Aland New Testament, Abbott-Smith's Manual Lexicon; Luke xii²⁷.