

Sermon - August 15th 2021 (Andrea Ward)

Matthew 6:25-34

“Anxiety and distress, interrupted occasionally by pleasure, is the normal course of man’s existence.” A comment made by American essayist and critic, Joseph Wood Krutch, in his 1965 book “The Twelve Seasons.” A comment that we may well agree with! There’s no shortage of things in life to worry about.

Worry and anxiety casts a huge shadow over many people’s lives, and can lead to all sorts of other health problems. It afflicts so many people.

As followers of Jesus, I’d like to think that we wouldn’t be afflicted by anxiety and worry or I’d like to think that we would handle / manage it better than others. If I’m honest, I can’t say that someone observing me closely would always be able to see any difference between me and someone who doesn’t know the Lord. I’ll be honest with you, I sometimes find it difficult to get to sleep because I’m worrying about things - things that have got to be done, things that I’ve not done...and the list goes on. Indeed, from a young age, I was a worrier, my mother could tell you that. My anxiety over my homework as a 12 year old cost me the opportunity to ball girl for some of the world’s top tennis stars in the late 1970’s! How sad! Is that

And we’ve probably all been on the receiving end of a well-meant but slightly annoying: “Don’t worry, it’ll be alright. “How do you know that it’ll be alright” we might sometimes want to reply, “What’s your evidence for being so sure everything’s going to be okay?” Clearly, worry and anxiety afflicted people as much in Jesus’s day as it does today, and here in his teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, we have Jesus telling us something very much along the lines of “Don’t worry, it’ll be alright” when he says: “Do not worry about your life...Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?” So, how is what Jesus tells us any more helpful than what other people sometimes say?

Let’s take a look at this very familiar passage and see what we can learn anew from it, and why we can take real assurance from Jesus’s words, for they are full of treasures of wisdom for us today.

Jesus begins:

“Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.” With any passage that begins with a “therefore” we have to ask ourselves what does the “therefore” refer to? What came before this piece of teaching? So, cast your mind back to last week and to Brian’s sermon, in which we were thinking about the importance of our focus and vision being on God’s kingdom, his work and serving him rather than money and accumulation of material things for ourselves.

Therefore, Jesus says, if we have made that choice to serve God rather than money, to make him the focus of our life rather than accumulating treasures here on earth - don’t be anxious about your life...what you will eat and drink, what you will wear. “Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?”

“But, Jesus,” I can hear someone saying, “Having food on the table and clothes to wear is important. They’re the basics that we need for health and existence, after all. It’s not like they’re luxuries!”

Absolutely, having food to eat, water to drink and clothes to wear matters. Notice that Jesus doesn’t say, “Do not worry about *whether* you will eat or drink; or *whether* you will have clothes to wear.” He says, “Do not worry about what you will eat and drink, and what you will wear.” As he emphasises a little further on in verse 32, God knows that we do need these things.

Even if as a follower of Jesus, we have made God the priority in our life, it’s easy to be influenced by the world around us and to slip back into the tendency to spend too much of our time and energy focusing on our material and physical needs, because they are so in our face. But focusing on material needs (and

desires) is the pursuit of those whose hearts are caught up with the immediate, short-term pleasures and satisfactions of life on earth rather than the lasting treasures of God's kingdom.

How is the Christian any different to the "pagan" if we're as caught up with the same things as the unbeliever is? Jesus's concern here is about what our priorities are. "Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?" When you stop and reflect, what is your life here on earth about? What are you here for? Do the choices you make in your daily living reflect God being your priority?

Of course, Jesus isn't saying that not worrying about food and drink and clothes means that we shouldn't have a responsible concern for providing for ourselves and when possible, earning money to put food on the table. Of course, not! We might say that this seems to be the logical suggestion from his illustration of the birds: "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them." He seems to be suggesting that the birds don't have to do anything. Well, of course they do: they still have to go out looking each day for that food - they do have to play their part, but the point is that the food is there to be found day by day.

But sometimes, the reality is that we do worry about whether we'll have enough for ourselves and those we love. Anyone who has experienced the support of the local Foodbank will know that. But the key question at stake here is "Do we really trust that God is a good, heavenly father who loves us and will take care of our needs?" Do we trust in the truth that we are more valuable to God than the birds who he feeds and provides for?

Why are we more valuable to God than the birds of the air? Look at Genesis 1 and the account of God creating the whole world, bit by bit. Every time he's created something, animals, birds, fish, trees, he looks and sees that, "It is good." But when he creates human beings, he looks and sees that "It is very good." God takes particular joy in human beings. So does it not follow therefore that he would want to provide for that part of his creation which he takes greatest delight in? But more than that, for those who have made the choice to give our lives to him and to serve him, we have become his beloved and precious children. How much more then will our good Father in heaven provide what his beloved children need to sustain the very life which he gave us in the first place?

The commentator Robert Mounce says, "Anxiety is pagan, in that, apart from a knowledge of the true God, there is ample reason to be anxious about many things." We are not like those who do not believe there is one greater than themselves who is looking after them. For us who do believe, when we feel worry and anxiety creeping up on us, it is an opportunity to exercise our faith in God, to learn more deeply to trust in our Father and his provision for us, seeking him in prayer for our needs. As Paul in Philippians 4:6-7 urges us:

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

In verse 27, Jesus continues with a rhetorical question: "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" Jesus is just so logical here: Look guys, what does worrying achieve anyway? Nothing - if anything, it might even shorten your life! i.e. Worry is just a waste of time! I certainly know that the morning after a night of hours lying awake worrying about things: what had those hours achieved other than feeling like a character out of one of those Zombie films, the following day.

Jesus continues this theme of God's provision with his second illustration of the lilies of the field. Even though these, along with the grasses they grow among, only last momentarily and are cast into the fire, they have been dressed and adorned with a beauty by God's that outdoes even the most glorious splendour of a king's rich robes. So, Jesus asks, will not God much more provide us with clothes to wear than these inconsequential lilies?

"So do not worry..." Jesus says, for "your heavenly Father knows that you need them" (clothes, food, drink). And then he comes to the heart of the matter, taking us once again to what it is that really matters:

“Seek first his (that is, your heavenly Father’s) kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Yes, we do need food and clothes, and physical things in this life, but life is much more than these things. Our life is first and foremost about knowing and loving God and seeking his ways, wanting to see his kingdom come here on earth, in and through our life; when we make him our priority and focus, then Jesus says, everything else will fall into place. God will provide for our needs.

Jesus ends this teaching about worry and anxiety with a wonderful proverb:

“Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough of its own.”

Jesus isn’t saying “Don’t bother planning or giving thought to what’s happening tomorrow” (lack of planning doesn’t usually end well in my experience!)

Jesus is being realistic about the nature of life which does indeed have plenty of troubles, so why add tomorrow’s problems to those we already have today? Why make things worse for yourselves than it needs be? Drawing on the work of bible commentator, Floyd Filson, Robert Mounce describes this teaching of Jesus beautifully as counsel for:

“living in the present instead of crippling the present by fear of the imagined future”.

Amen to that!

Are you worrying about something at the moment? Are you feeling anxious about something? Jesus doesn’t just give us a flippant “Don’t worry, it’ll all be fine” but his counsel not to worry is based on a truth that we can utterly depend on: that for those who seek God and his ways, that same God is our loving Heavenly father, who cares for us deeply and will provide everything we need. We can trust in him 100%.