

## Online sermon, 20<sup>th</sup> February 2022

### **Matthew 6:25-34; Psalm 147**

All Bible quotations are from the NRSV

“Do not worry about your life” (6:25). Well, that’s so easy to say, isn’t it? Easy to say, but also a bit disconcerting I think. After all, there always seems to be so much to worry about – globally, nationally, locally, personally, from climate change to positive Covid tests, from energy prices to what the A34 is like today. And that’s just in the present – what about all those worries about what you have done wrong in the past, and then what will happen in the future? If I were to imagine myself as one of the crowd listening to Jesus, I can’t help feeling that I would be shouting out “Do not worry – what are you talking about?”

But context is everything of course. Today’s reading is only a small part of the Sermon on the Mount, the extraordinary block of teaching which takes up three chapters of Matthew’s gospel. And that sermon is all about challenging its audience to be revolutionary. I know I have said it before, but I think that we often lose sight of Jesus the revolutionary. He was not standing in front of this crowd throwing out platitudes and saying things everyone had heard umpteen times before – that certainly would not have been worth following Jesus around the country to hear. No, what he said was unexpected and exhilarating, and turned the world upside down. Love your enemies; live in peace; don’t retaliate; forgive others in order to be forgiven yourself; do not judge others; be modest and humble in your religious observance; expect to be blessed if you are grieving, or meek, or persecuted. Over and over he says “You heard that it was said...But I say to you...” (5:21-22; 27-28; 31-32; 33-34; 38-39; 43-44). He was resetting everything the crowd knew. Revolution does not have to be violent; Jesus led the greatest revolution there has ever been and won his first followers by speaking words of love and liberation to the most oppressed, and the poorest people of the time. One of the commentaries I read while thinking about this passage described the Bible as “resistance literature”, which it seems to me is precisely what it is. (Richard Rohr, *Jesus’ Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount*)

One thing Jesus does not do, however, is say there is never any reason to worry, or that life is easy. That eye-catching headline statement “do not worry” – you can imagine it in big black letters on the front of a newspaper- is balanced out by the comment at the end of the reading that “[t]oday’s trouble is enough

for today” (6:34) (that bit would be in rather smaller type). And he knew that the path he was setting out was not one which would be easy to follow; in chapter 7 (7:14) we are told that “the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life.” To be honest, you might think that he was adding to everyone’s worries rather than making them feel better.

So why does Jesus say “do not worry”? I think we need to bear in mind who Jesus’ original audience was. The crowd listening to him was probably mostly made up of the poor. We mustn’t forget that Jesus was also poor, so there would have been an instant connection. This was someone who could identify with them, and they could identify with him. He knew all about their day to day concerns and pressures, the gruelling subsistence level existence they had, because it was also his life. He knew that they had lots to worry about. His message then, as well as perhaps being rather surprising, was also uplifting. Jesus told them of a God who cares for and loves them, even if other people don’t, and we must remember the extraordinary power of that now, for all of us, but most especially for the marginalised and excluded members of society. They are loved by God, regardless of how they are treated by other people. In the Psalm, we heard of God gathering the outcasts, healing the broken hearted, and raising up the downtrodden, and this love is in Jesus’ words too (147:2,3,6).

Thus the central message is that God loves, values and knows us. This applies to everyone – there is nothing and no one that is beneath God’s notice, a point I made when I talked about the wedding at Cana a few weeks ago. We are shown this vividly in the Psalm, where we are told that God named all the stars (147:4). He is intimately involved with his whole creation, - he names all the stars and knows all our names too. He knows and loves us all as individuals. Therefore, he is the one we should always turn to for help - or to get guidance as to how to provide help for others, depending on our situation. He is with us in all our troubles and knows and understands our fears. And while it may be that in this life, we do not have all that we might want, or feel that we need, we can still be assured that in God’s kingdom we will have everything we need.

What is the benefit to us of this simple but extraordinary message, that God loves us? In what way does it help us follow Jesus’s instruction not to worry? Well, I would argue that God’s love frees us from being overwhelmed by excessive worry, and helps us to manage our anxieties. As Jesus says in John chapter 8, “if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (8:36). We can therefore focus on what is happening now, and not be anxious about what may

happen in the future or distressed about past mistakes (and by the way, I am not saying that this is easy). Instead, we can have faith that we can dedicate the future to God, and ask for his help, handing over our worries and fears to him – something I have to confess that I am not very good at! It's hard to let go sometimes, particularly of past errors, even when you know it is the right thing to do. But Jesus is asking the crowd, his audience, his people, to do this, not because it is easy, but because it is hard. The assurance of God's love can also, I think, let us slow down and stop rushing to achieve and get everything done. As a result, we have more time to appreciate the glory of his creation around us, and see the evidence of his love and care for everything. Jesus did make time to be alone and at peace, and his comments here about the birds and flowers suggest that when he did so he truly noticed and rejoiced in what he saw. I'm guilty of not stopping and listening and noticing what is around me often enough, but when I do I'm awestruck by what I see. For example, we seem to have had some very beautiful sunrises and sunsets recently, and when I gaze at those, lo and behold my worries do fade in the face of this evidence of God's creative power. And it's not just in the New Testament that we are advised to take time to enjoy ourselves and notice what is happening around us. A wonderful verse in Ecclesiastes says: "I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun" (8:15). I'm sure there's a joke to be made there about 10 Downing Street, but I will resist! The point is that we do need to step back and put worries aside to sustain ourselves from day to day, and the assurance of God's love enables us to do that.

If we can be free from unnecessary worry, then we can be free to focus on what really matters and rethink our priorities and concerns. We shouldn't fixate on worldly goods or treasures; as Jesus advises earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, "[d]o not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." (6:16-20). Do not focus on acquiring things to make your life more comfortable on earth, as that will never be truly satisfying, and the more stuff you get the more you want. Instead, look to the gifts that come from God, such as grace, love, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus himself, which will give you everything. And remember always "[i]n everything to do to others as you would have them do to you." (7:12). With this reorientation of our priorities, we are freed to "strive for the Kingdom of God" (6:33). Admittedly I think we would all struggle to meet the very high bar Jesus sets in chapter 5 –

“[b]e perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48) – which I think may be exaggeration for effect as he surely cannot have believed that anyone listening to him could manage that, but we will be heading in the right direction. And sometimes that is the best you can do.

I started by saying, basically, how on earth is it possible not to worry? What sort of advice was this from Christ? But when this passage is broken down, it's clear that what Jesus is saying is – as always – rather deeper than it may at first appear. We can never be in a position where we are not worried about something, and indeed I think that it would be quite odd if that were the case. But we are loved and cared for by God, who understands all our needs, and is there to take on and help us with our worries and anxieties; we just need to hand them over to him. Through this wonderful and gracious gift he frees us to live the best life we can, dedicated to him and his service.

Eliza Wheaton

February 2022