

Sermon feb 12 2023 SJB and SSC “Do not worry”

Matthew 6: 25-end

I wonder how you were feeling as you heard those words of Jesus this morning. “Do not worry”. I guess that might depend on how life is going for you right now. If you’re in a good place, slept well, feel fine, family and friends doing well, finances working out OK, maybe it just made you smile and nod assent. If on the other hand things are going pear shaped, getting on top of you, keeping you awake at night, it might have been a different story. Thinking about the unspeakable tragedies taking place in the world right now in Turkey and Syria and the terrifying war in Ukraine and other conflicts, and near to home so many people at their wits end with the cost of living crisis, the difficulty of getting medical attention, crime on the increase, the climate crisis, then that message is much harder to take on board. At best it might seem to fly in the face of commonsense and of caring responsibilities. At worst it could really make you angry. I used to think It would have been be no good for me as a responsible mother to think about birds and flowers and leave it to chance for my family to eat and to have clean clothes for school and work, no good at all. I hardly dare Confess this, but before I studied the Bible seriously I even used to think, "That's all very well but Jesus probably had a band of women doing his washing and providing food in the back ground and no family to sort out!"

But now I understand that Jesus is not condemning sensible planning and caring for basic human needs. Not at all. He's not asking us to frolic around all dewy eyed, bird watching and holding out our hands for others to provide. Rather, he's talking about the state of our hearts.

Are we allowing ourselves to be all-consumed with worry about the details of our material lives or is our ultimate trust in the love and goodness of God? What matters most to us? The state of our bank balance or our love for God? The state of our wardrobe or our love for our neighbour? Where does our focus lie? Where are we centred? Anchored?

As always but especially when confronted with a message that could well seem difficult to take on board, we need to look at the context. Matthew arranges Jesus’s teaching into five great blocks, with narrative in between them and our

reading comes almost at the end of the first great block. Jesus has called some particular people to be close to him and they have seen him drawing huge crowds with miracles of healing and the proclamation that the kingdom of God is close at hand. Great news for a poor and oppressed people waiting for their God to do something. Their prophets promised great things, the coming of a saviour, but they've been waiting for so long and their own religious leaders oppress them nearly as much as the hated occupying forces of Rome.

This Jesus really is something else!

Huge crowds are now surrounding him wherever he goes. At the beginning of chapter five we read this: "When Jesus saw the crowds he went up the mountain and sat down and his disciples came to him". When the rabbi sits down with his disciples before him, that is the sign that serious teaching is to follow. And follow it does, in spades! Challenging teaching on such themes as Forgiveness, true religion versus hypocrisy, attitude to material things, how to pray, how to live a life with true meaning and purpose that will make a difference in the world and advance the values of God's kingdom.

Almost at the end of this first block of teaching comes our passage beginning "Therefore I tell you do not worry".

Just an aside here. This is not about piling guilt on people who are suffering from chronic anxiety. Jesus never condemns people with mental health issues. He acts to bring them healing and peace. But here, after all this challenging teaching about how his followers should strive to live, how their focus needs to be on the values of his kingdom, he is reassuring them of God's all embracing love and provision for all creation, including them- including us..

I am a natural worrier as I guess some of you are. I fear chaos overtaking me so I make lists and write plans. That's very useful up to a point, but it's all too easy to become obsessed with excessive worrying that saps your energy and wears you down- -and not only you but those close to you!

This passage reminds me that I need to practise what I preach!

Pay attention to creation, says Jesus. Look at the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. Really look and think what creation can teach you in all its glory,

about the creator. These days many people seem obsessed by recording everything on their phones instead of really looking. I \m often guilty of this too but when I put my phone away and walk across the moor or along the canal paying full attention to the beauty all around me, my worries melt away, at least for a while. I am filled with gratitude and wonder and delight. We humans are responsible now more than ever for paying attention, taking care of god's precious creation, and we all have our parts to play.

If. I've been fretting about something, letting it loom large, then thinking of these words of Jesus, really paying attention to creation with all that that means for our century, is very salutary.

I believe his key question is this and I make no apologies for the repetition: Are we allowing ourselves to be all-consumed with worry about the details of our material lives or is our ultimate trust in the love and goodness of God? Where does our focus lie? Where are we centred? Anchored?

Bringing our worries to God in faith and trust is the first step. Then we have to decide if we can sensibly do anything about what's bugging us. If we can, then having asked for God's help we can take action. If not, let's try to leave it with him. If having done all of that we find ourselves turning back and fretting yet again we can repeat the process as many times as it takes. We may well not find a speedy, neat solution but we will know that God wants to embrace us in his love and in his peace and in his strength.

I'd like to invite you now, if you are willing, to take that piece of paper you were given as you came in and use it to record any particular worry that's bugging you--something you need to bring before god- -a concern- -a situation- -a person- -whatever you wish. No need to go into great detail or write your name. Some initials, a word, a sketch or any other mark will do. God knows you and what's on your heart. When you come up for communion or a blessing please feel free to leave your paper in the basket on the altar as a sign of your desire to entrust your concerns to God and sometime later we'll pray over them all and send them up safely in smoke. Amen

*NB at St Stephens where the service is Morning Prayer I will collect up their papers and tell them I will add them to the basket on the altar at St John's.
Carole Lewis*