

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday before Lent Year A 2023

Matthew 6.25-34

(Angela Mirani, reader at St Edward's Lugano)

The gospel passage from the Sermon on the Mount probably contains some of the most well-known words in the Bible, words much-loved and quoted by past generations, though to us, I think, they can seem almost romantically naïve with the references to birds and lilies and not worrying. At first sight that is!

In a nutshell, Jesus is telling the disciples (and we are all his disciples too) that they must choose whether to have God as the priority in their lives, or to care more for all the things the secular world offers. Choosing to strive for God's kingdom of love, mercy and justice means that we will always receive God's love and mercy, he will always be with us. Jesus then sets out ways of coping with three kinds of worry that can block our relationship with God. By 'worry' we can mean anything from great fear to little things that keep niggling and bothering us.

Firstly, not to be consumed by money or worldly wants, not to fuss about the latest fashions and food, - there's more to life than that.

Secondly, not waste our energies on problems we can do absolutely nothing about.

And thirdly, not to get all worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow or next week or next month but to put our relationship with God first, trusting that everything else will fall into place.

Well that may have summed it up but I'm not going to stop there because it's not all so straightforward in practice, is it? Who can go through life with no worries? Who amongst us hasn't lain in bed at night with 'what ifs....' and 'how on earth am I going to.....' going round and round our heads.

Was Jesus being totally unrealistic in what he says here? What about people who do indeed worry about where the next meal will come from, or the starving in many parts of the world? How can all those suffering in Ukraine and other war zones not be worried stiff about whether family and friends are safe and when it will all end; how will they rebuild their lives; and those in Turkey who have lost absolutely everything. I have a friend at present in England but who works for part of the year with the Christian churches in both Antakya and Adana. How can she not help but worry about all her friends there? some of whom have been killed, some are trying to get away, some are still under the rubble. But she is doing something positive by offering her apartment in Adana which is still, fortunately, intact, to some homeless members of her church.

Context is so important in order not to be side-tracked by all these tragedies. We have to look at what Jesus **was** saying and to whom he was speaking.

He wasn't being unrealistic, but he wasn't generalising; he was talking directly to those sitting in front of him and their discipleship.

The picture we get from the whole Sermon is of a group, not so well-off *not* to have worries, some may even have been quite rich, and most would have had some education. Everything Jesus says to them is challenging them to look at the way they lead their lives. It can challenge us in our comfortable situation to do the same.

I can imagine Jesus sitting there, a beautiful day, a hillside covered with wild flowers, birds circling over-head, joy on his face 'look, look at the beauty around you, it's good, God made a wonderful world, take in this moment, *live this moment, delight in it.*

Trying to do just that last week while I drank my mid-morning coffee, I saw, in the space of just 10 minutes, a pair of doves, finches, a robin, a blackbird and its mate, sparrows and two magpies visit my garden, all so different, each beautiful in its own way. The finches were at the fast food outlet, as my grandsons call it, that is the peanuts and fat balls hanging from our bird table. The rest were very busy pecking at the ground to find food a reminder that, although God feeds them, he doesn't throw the food into their nests, they work hard for it, which takes us back to what Jesus was, and *was not* saying. With his birds of the air and lilies of the field images he was not saying 'sit back do nothing, God will do it all for you' but rather get on with life do what needs to be done, but don't make a big deal about 'stuff'.

It's a balancing act, isn't it? It is not about how rich we are but our relationship to wealth that is important and can easily get out of hand, this is what Jesus is warning us about; wanting more and more money and what it can buy – it can be dangerous, it can become our focus, 'where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.' So the *not* worrying about these things that Jesus talks about, is in order to keep things in proportion and our mind on the things of God's kingdom, looking outwards towards the needs of others as we grow as Jesus' followers.

The second type of worry is about things of which we can do absolutely nothing, yet we do worry, wasting time, energy and our own peace of mind, doing just that:

*"can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"* or as other translations say, *'a single cubit to your height?.'*

Rhetorical questions obviously.

I might worry about the fact we need rain, or my niece's health or a silly thing like when my grandson is going to learn to sit still in school, but I can't do the slightest thing to help or change those situations, except pray of course.

As we worry and try not to, St Paul's advice to the church at Philipp may come to mind:

*6 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. (Philippians 4.6-7)*

How relevant that is also to the third piece of advice about worry that Jesus gives: *not to spoil today by worrying about the future and what it might bring.* I am a worrier by nature and in my teaching days, with a young family, church and a busy musical life in and outside school, I would get really stressed about how I was going to manage all sorts of things that were often months away. Then, often by the time the dreaded moment arrived something had changed, there was extra help, or I just coped anyway. So much sleep lost for nothing. It was this passage that helped me not to do that so much. Now I often put things in boxes in my mind to come back to at the right time. It doesn't always work, but generally it's very helpful.

But it isn't easy, is it? Life is full of unknowns and problems descending from one minute to the next. Next week's flight has been cancelled; we are waiting for possibly life changing medical results or hospital visits; school exams which will define our future path; visitors suddenly descending on us at an awkward time—a myriad of big or little things that can turn our world upside down.

Of course we should plan ahead, try to foresee possible trouble and have a plan B, without it things could be even worse; but sometimes we must live one day at a time. A phrase came up on Facebook the other day that seems to be echoing Jesus:

*'meet today's problems with today's strength. Don't start tackling tomorrow's problems until tomorrow. You don't have tomorrow's strength yet. You simply have enough for today' \**

The Sermon on the Mount is pointing towards our working out all aspects of our life *in the love in which God holds us.* It tells us to look round at all the beauty of the world, count our blessings, know that whatever is happening and will happen, God is in it with us and will not leave us, as he tells us in our first reading from Isaiah;

*I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.*

(Isaiah 49.15.16)

\*Max Lucado