

Trust in God...

Consider the lilies of the field ...

The sermon given at Evensong on 24 February 2019 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Genesis 1:1-2:3; Matthew 6:25-end

I wonder, what particular worries keep you awake at night? I imagine that over the last few weeks nobody living in the Somerset Levels will have slept very well as they lay in bed listening to the rain coming down and wondering how far the flood water was going to come up. Parents of teenage children are famously insomniac, many lying awake until they hear the sound of the key in the front door signalling that their offspring is safely home. When one of my daughters was very little, and we were at that time living not far from the coast, she developed a terrible anxiety that while she was asleep, crabs would emerge from the sea, hike the couple of miles or so across the fields, lay siege to the vicarage, and haul her screaming from her bed to who knows what fate. Her fears were only moderately calmed by our repeated assurance that crabs are like Daleks, and are rendered totally helpless when confronted by a flight of stairs. And then there was the cartoon in Punch, which tells you how long ago I must have seen it, in which a woman is sitting upright in bed in the middle of the night, urgently shaking her sleeping man, saying, “But darling, how do you know that the little light in the fridge goes off when you shut the door?”

The truth is that anxiety is part of the human condition. Whether we have big worries, about where the next meal is coming from, or whether global warming will bring life on earth to an end, or little worries, like whether the fridge light really does go off, it would seem that most of us are ‘hard-wired’ for worry. So much so that many of us, even if we have no real problems, will still find things to worry about. Winston Churchill used to tell a story about an old man who said on his death-bed that he had had a lot of trouble in his life, most of which never happened.

So how do we handle worry? If we knew the answer to that we'd save the NHS millions of pounds spent on anti-depressants, and we'd lift millions of people out of misery.

Unfortunately, most solutions seem a little unconvincing: "Don't worry about a thing", sang the late, great, Bob Harley, "Cos every little thing's gonna be alright." If you think that there isn't much of a basis for Bob's optimism, his argument is quite robust compared to the slogan of the early 20th century mystic, Meher Baba, who use to say, "Don't worry, be happy." – If only. Then there's the 'Lion King' when, at the point where the hero's fortunes are lowest, his new friends sing 'Hakuna matata' – 'no worries': but that turns out to be a form of denial.

At first glance, Jesus's words in this evening's Gospel reading appear to be in this vein, "Don't worry" he keeps on saying:

- Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink
- Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?
- Why do you worry about clothing?
- So don't worry, saying, "What will we eat? Or what will we drink? Or what will we wear?"
- Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own

Jesus' message here is clear and simple. It's just not immediately obvious that it is all that helpful, like the sign seen outside a church in Leeds which read

'Don't let worry kill you: the church can help'.

The command not to worry seems unrealistic, given that telling most of us not to worry is like telling us not to breathe. Even when we know our feelings are irrational, even when we know perfectly well that we've got things out of proportion, the 'worry' switch simply isn't something you can flick off. Thankfully, Jesus has more to say on the subject of worry beyond simply "Don't".

In the first place, he makes a connection between worry and the Gentiles. "Don't worry" he says, "Saying 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed you heavenly Father knows that you need all of these things". The things Jesus is talking about are not trivial. Food,

Drink and clothing are essential for life; if you don't have them, you've got something real to worry about. But Jesus associates anxiety about the essentials of life with the Gentiles, that is, those who are unbelievers, with those who do not know the faithfulness of the Creator God. What Jesus seems to be saying is that anxiety is a symptom of unbelief. If you find yourself unable to trust God for your future provision, your only viable alternative is to trust yourself. And I would like to suggest that taking upon your own shoulders the responsibility for the smooth running of the cosmos is an enormously stressful enterprise. I know that sounds a bit flippant and I'm not seriously suggesting we all feel personally responsible for the orbit of the planets, but if we have no belief in a Creator, or no capacity to trust Him, then coping with the future becomes a matter of pitting our own wills against vast impersonal forces over which we have to maintain the illusion of control – no wonder we get stressed.

So Jesus' diagnosis is that worry is the result of unbelief; of failing to trust in the God who feeds the birds and who clothes the lilies of the field. This means that there is a positive side to Jesus' message; the antidote to anxiety is faith in the Creator. We know that, don't we? When we are trying to get a crisis into some sort of perspective we say things like, "Oh well, the world will still keep turning", or "At least the sky hasn't fallen in", or "the Minster will still be here tomorrow." Such statements implicitly assert the faithfulness of God who does not abandon the world he has made. Jesus is here making a series of statements about how God can be trusted with the future. The birds don't have pension plans, but they still eat; the flowers don't have a livelihood, but their sense of style is second to none. Don't you think God cares more about you than them?

At which point you may be scratching your head and thinking "Actually, I'm not sure. I'm not sure that God does necessarily care about me, Wendy Worry, or me, Andy Anxious. I'm not sure I do matter to him more than the natural world around me." In which case, we have to re-focus on the one who is speaking. Who is it exactly who is suggesting that God can be trusted? Who is it who is saying that the Creator remains faithful to his creatures? Who is it who is implying the Giver of Life is stronger than death? Why, it's Jesus of course: the one who trusted God all the way to the cross; the one whose trust was vindicated on the third day; the one whose trust set him free from fear of the future, even in Gethsemane.

This quality of trust is fundamental to the way life is lived. Without that ability to leave tomorrow in God's hands, Anxiety becomes the default setting: Anxiety about whether we can sustain the illusion of being in control; Anxiety about whether we can manage. Along with Anxiety comes its ugly sister, Fear. Fear and Anxiety work against any sense of well-being. Whenever Fear and Anxiety are around, other people will always be a potential threat, especially if they are in any way different or not one of 'us'. They will appear to us as rivals or competitors. When Fear and Anxiety are around, resources will always seem scarce, no matter how much there are. We shall always be concerned to grab and hold on to as much as we can, in case there isn't enough to go round tomorrow. When we give room to Fear and Anxiety, the past always seems better than the future. They kill any sense of confidence or initiative, or hope. They make us small, grasping, backward-looking and afraid of change.

Alternatively, we can place our faith in the God and Father of Jesus Christ, the God of Creation and Resurrection and when we do that, a number of things follow:

One is that it takes the pressure off us to manage the unknowable future by ourselves. When we allow God to be God, we can become much more generous with ourselves and comfortable with our own limitations. We can be at peace – which is why one of the promises of the Christian Gospel is the promise of peace – to accept ourselves as God's children, as we are meant to be. We can be set free from pretending to be something we're not.

The second consequence of trusting God is that we are no longer alone. The attitude of trust opens us up, both to God and to one another. So other people no longer need to be seen as competitors and as a potential threat, but as brothers and sisters who bear something of the Father's image, who are channels of his love, and who are endlessly mysterious, surprising and creative. The cultivation of that trust can make us more generous, in our attitudes, in our giving of ourselves and our resources.

The opposite of worry is not happiness. It's trust. Jesus invites trust just as he shows it. He invites you to trust him, to discover just how trustworthy he is. And he promises that the act of trusting will open the door to all sorts of other things: peace of mind; generosity of spirit; hope. With those things in place, the material needs will look

after themselves. And those who learn how to trust will count themselves happy indeed.