

Sermon preached by the Priest Pastor
St Marylebone Parish Church
2nd Sunday before Lent 2020

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you
O Lord our strength and redeemer.

There seems to be an epidemic of anxiety in our society.

Apparently, a third of Britons will experience an anxiety disorder at some stage in their life, with an explosion of reported anxiety among teenagers and young adults.

Life has become hugely complex for young people; facing crippling expectations regarding achievement, appearance, debt, climate, popularity and the blessing and curse that is the online world.

Alongside all that is the fact that the bonds of community and support are dissipating in a fragmenting society. Add to that Brexit, the Coronavirus and various storms, and we are in danger of living our lives permanently in high anxiety.

So can Christian faith help us in our anxiety?

Into this scenario comes Jesus' words from today's gospel. 'do not worry'.

Three times he says it. It sounds so simple, simplistic even,

and for those of us who suffer from anxiety we might respond, 'It's all very well Jesus, but what about x or y in my life?' Many of us have very comfortable lives, without the anxiety of not having a roof over our heads or sufficient food for the day, or the threat of our house being flooded, yet the pain of anxiety is just as intense.

But do not worry, Jesus says, God provides food for the birds, clothing for the lilies, and your heavenly Father knows you need all these things.

Let's unpack this command of Jesus'. 'Do not worry'

Firstly, Jesus is **not** saying that refusing to worry means refusing to make provision and to work. As Martin Luther pointed out, God may feed the birds, but he does not drop food in to their beaks!

St Paul, who might have expected to be supported financially by all the early churches in his preaching and mission activities nevertheless worked hard with his hands as a tentmaker. Jesus doesn't call us to be care – less but care – free.

Secondly, Jesus commands us not to worry because worry strips us of our spiritual growth and our joy. In the Parable of the Sower, the seed sown among thorns is choked by the cares of the world and it yields nothing.

Someone once said that worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow, it only saps today of its joy. So, worrying is not a neutral activity, it actually damages our ability to grow spiritually, and can be damaging emotionally and physically too.

Thirdly, worrying gets in the way of our relationship with Jesus. As Christians, one of our greatest callings is to learn to trust God. The verse before our gospel began is the famous one concerning the fact that no one can serve two masters.

We have to decide not just whether to **serve** God or money, but whether to **trust** God or money. Do we actively put our trust in God?

Do we believe in our heart that he truly and actively loves us as a father, who knows how to give good things to his children, or do we just assent to that belief intellectually?

Having a lovely house full of things will not help us to weather the storms that will come to all of us in life, because that it is what life is like. Stuff happens. But true faith is to actively and intentionally **trust** God, especially when life is challenging. St Francis de Sales has a lovely reflection about this. It goes like this:

Do not look forward in fear to the changes and chances of this life: Rather look to them with full confidence that, as they arise, God to whom you belong will, in His love, enable you to **profit by them**. He has guided you thus far in life, and He will lead you safely through all trials; and when you cannot stand it, God will bury you in His arms. Do not fear what may happen tomorrow; the same everlasting Father will take care of you.

He will either shield you from suffering, or will give you unfailing strength to bear it.

Be at peace, then, and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginations.

A couple of things that might help us when we feel the rising tide of anxiety.

To try to live one day at a time. 'Today's trouble is enough for today' said our gospel. Or the King James version of this, which I prefer, 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof' One of the main points of the Lords Prayer is to ask 'Give us this day our daily bread'. Not 'Give us a year's worth of bread', just enough for today.

One thing I find quite helpful is as I'm lying in bed just about to fall asleep is to think of three things to thank God for from the day, even if it's been a difficult day, especially if its been a difficult day. Call to remembrance the good things God has given you as you look back. And sometimes look much further back, has God given you strength to bear trials?; has he provided?

In the Old Testament you may remember Samuel, after a victory against the Phillistines set up a stone and called it Ebenezer or 'Thus far the Lord has helped us'.

A statement of trust. Abraham also named the place where God sent the ram to be sacrificed in place of Isaac. He called it 'The Lord will provide' or 'Jehovah Jireh' A statement of trust.

Ebenezer: 'Thus far the Lord has helped us'

Jehovah Jireh: The Lord will provide'

Anxiety just focuses on the bad things. Apparently, we remember bad things far more strongly and in detail than good things. So it makes sense to actively try to remember the good things to create a balance.

Finally, St Paul reminds us 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God'.

Tell God all that worries you, and then leave it in his hands, not forgetting to thank him.

And then get on with striving for the kingdom and his righteousness.

Focus on loving and serving this weary world in Christ's name.

The world out there is waiting for the wonder that is you. Jehovah Jireh!