

Sermon for 6th October 2024, Year B, Harvest Festival.

Preached at St John Baillieston

Matthew 6:25-33

Sermon

‘Do not worry about what you will eat, what you will drink, or what you will wear,’ says Jesus. If you happen to be homeless, or in debt, or are making use of foodbanks, you might be forgiven for thinking this instruction from Jesus is entirely unhelpful. Being in unmanageable debt is one of the most anxiety-inducing situations you can possibly experience. How then does it feel to hear Jesus saying, “Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be given to you as well”, when we all know plenty of examples of good people who haven’t had their most basic needs met?

And even for those who do have pretty stable and comfortable lives with respect to food, clothing and shelter, we still have plenty of things to be legitimately anxious about. Everything has become way more expensive than we’re used to; we don’t have enough doctors and nurses to cover long-delayed surgeries; energy prices are through the roof. There are brutal wars, oppression and injustice in so many places, and then there’s environmental destruction, the melting of the glaciers, rising sea-levels, and the increasing storms and droughts and flooding of climate change.

Anxiety is off the scale in our society, and it’s become so much part of our lives that we’d probably think there was something wrong if we weren’t feeling it. When I was a child and a young adult in the 70s and 80s I had some anxieties of course, but in retrospect they feel so inconsequential compared to what Millennials and ‘Gen-Z’ are coping with today on their all-encompassing social

media platforms, student loan debt, and the impossibility of finding affordable housing.

So, what do we make of Jesus telling us, simply, 'do not worry? Is that something you can just choose to do? If Jesus tells us not to worry, aren't we just going to feel anxious about being anxious?

I think we should bear in mind that Jesus is trying to be reassuring here, not critical. He's essentially trying to encourage his followers to trust that we can rely on God's provision, rather than relying only on our own possessions.

In that respect, Jesus is preaching more to those who think they've got their lives sorted, rather than those who don't have enough. Just before his passage he's famously declared that 'you cannot serve both God and money'. So, if Jesus is criticising anything, he's criticising the voice that says, "we can't share anything of what we have, because we might need it for ourselves tomorrow". But Jesus says, 'do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own'. How rash he sounds! And yet even outside the church, teachers of mindfulness and therapists and counsellors are encouraging stressed out people to stay for a while in the present moment by quietening our thoughts about the future, to find peace in the Here and Now.

In his sayings, Jesus also calls us from our anxieties about the future, and our regrets about the past, back into the present. Look at the lilies of the field, he says. They don't spend their lives working overtime to pay for a holiday to recover from working overtime! But they receive everything they need to be everything God made them to be. Look too at the birds of the air; they find their food on trees, and worms in the ground after rain, so why do we humans so often spend our time worrying about things that may go wrong tomorrow?

When I was a novice nun and lived in a monastery for a couple of years, all I had to worry about was doing the task in front of me until the next bell rang. I sat

there in the laundry at the ironing machine, passing bed sheets through the rollers with the light coming through the windows and the smell of laundry detergent and fabric softener in the air, and I had nothing at all to worry about, safe in the knowledge that another of the nuns was making lunch, and someone else was doing the cleaning and tidying. What bliss it all was, and yet it was still so difficult to contemplate taking a vow of poverty and giving away everything that I had worked for in my life, even with the very clear promise of a life free of worries about what I would eat or drink or wear, or where I might sleep.

Despite leaving the monastery almost exactly 12 years ago, I still remember those blissful times without worries, and this is why I often like to start my own prayers by remembering that God is here, in the shafts of light through the windows, in the wind and rain outside, in the smell of wood and stone in the old church, in the warm smiles of those around us, in our own breath, and most clearly in the silence. When we're aware of God's presence all around us, we are drawn into a place where anxiety cannot come.

When Jesus says, 'you can't serve God and money', it's not because he won't let you or he'll punish you if you try, it's because while you're in love with the one, it's impossible to think of the other. This is why the Benedictine nuns like the community I joined have as their sole entrance requirement, 'do you seek God with your whole heart'? If yes, then the whole experience is full of deep contentment, because in seeking God first, all your other needs are provided for.

If we can remember to keep God in our thoughts and pray as we go about our day, I think what we discover is that our value to God doesn't depend in any way on what we can do or achieve. God loves us just as we are, and spending time with God helps us experience how it feels to be loved for no reason.

This is, I believe, what Jesus is trying to teach. He's not trying to tell us we shouldn't plan for the future; at this time of year even squirrels do that, and

farmers still needs to plough the fields and scatter the seed for the crops to grow in the spring.

What I believe Jesus is saying is that he wants us to have the sort of life where all our sense of self-worth and wellbeing comes from knowing that God loves us, regardless of who we are or what we've done. This is something that is always true. Whatever age we are, whatever our struggles with our health, God loves us the same now as when we were newborn babies, and just as much as when we were strong and in our prime.

The possibility of freedom from anxiety is one of Jesus' most precious teachings. It is a gift he offers us, with no strings, and being free of anxiety ourselves means we can respond to others with open-hearted generosity, love, and kindness of our own.

Seek God whenever you can, Jesus says, and discover just how much God loves you, and how that love can send all your worries and anxieties flying away like the birds heading south in winter.