

Sermon for 12.02.23 Second Sunday before Lent.

Genesis 1:1-13 & 26-2.3.

Matthew 6:25-end

### Why Worry?

I've never thought of myself as a particularly sporty person, but if *worrying* ever became an Olympic sport, I would certainly put myself forward to represent my country. I think I could win at least a silver medal, if not a gold.

We hear some advice this morning from Jesus, taken from Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says: "' Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear...do not worry about tomorrow...'"

I don't know if, like me, you appreciate the advice but find it very hard to follow? 'Do not worry'. Does Jesus realise just how many things there are to worry about at the moment? Cost of living; strikes; climate; earthquakes; war. Mental health issues are on the rise in this country and sometimes, in their most distressing forms, can end in suicide or even in violence towards others.

It's difficult to imagine that times were any easier in Jesus' day, however. In comparison to a first century Jew, we have better healthcare, better housing, more disposable income, more leisure, and much longer life expectancy. But we also have the technology to beam every latest international disaster onto our TVs, smartphones, and smart watches, and be reminded of them every ten minutes.

So, was Jesus naïve to say, 'don't worry'? When he talks of God clothing the birds of the air and the grass of the field, was it hopelessly unrealistic talk dressed up as airy-fairy poetry? Worry seems to be such a universal human trait that it's hard to see how not worrying could possibly be achieved. At least that's how it seems to me.

I think there's an element of psychology in this – I'm sure you've noticed that some people are more prone to worry than others. It's generally very nice to be around non-worriers, those special ones who have a 'non-anxious presence', although sometimes it might be they have their head in the sand. The teenager who's not worrying at all about their exam results might be just a

little bit too chilled – although these days it's more likely our teens are having to worry too much about exam results.

If you're a worrier, it's probably coming in part from a good place. People who worry tend to be good at thinking ahead and planning; they tend to care a lot and they can be over-conscientious and feel the burden of responsibility too heavily (that's the end of the autobiographical bit).

To be fair, Jesus probably had in mind, as he gave this teaching, a whole outlook which leaves God out and puts faith only in externals. 'Pagans' come in for some harsh words in the New Testament; 'pagan' is a synonym for someone who didn't have the concept of a loving God who was available to them. It would be a case of 'eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die'. It's not so much that a pagan would be worried about what to eat and what to wear – more that they would be blind to the more important things in life, such as trust and wonder.

(I think today's pagans are more likely to be 'spiritual but not religious' and may be less concerned with material goods than your average right-wing capitalist but that's by the by).

How are believers to be different?

Is there a direction to explore that might lead us beyond the path of worry, to a better, more trusting place. Believe me, a lot of my life has been a search for the answer to this question. What does worry reveal to us about ourselves and our trust (or mistrust) in God?

For help in this we're going to delve into our foundational story – the story of Genesis. However you take the account of Genesis, and some take it more literally than others, it gives us some important theological building blocks. What does Genesis show us about living the Jesus way and quitting worrying?

It turns out the theology of creation is very comforting. God is Creator, and we are the creatures, the pinnacle of the created order, even. Whatever you create, you care for. Art works, sculpture, a beautiful piece of clothing: if you've made something with your own hands, you will have channelled something of your very self into it, and you will automatically care for that creation. I care for this talk I wrote – that it does what I hoped, that it's good news, that it's effective. I care where it ends up, who reads it.

To be reminded of our creatureliness is to remember our loving Creator. Our Creator and sustainer cares what happens to us. God walks in the garden with us: the garden was his idea in the first place.

To worry ourselves sick is perhaps to exalt ourselves above our status as creatures, although we do have responsibility to the earth, and to each other, of course. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light” – something else that Jesus said which sometimes also feels impossible. And he continued: “I am humble and gentle in heart” – maybe that’s the key. Humble trust, not lifting up our eyes too high as we’re counselled in Psalm 131.

When Job had worn himself to shreds with non-comprehension of his suffering, it was the Creator who answered out of the silence. His answer was poetry, not facts. ‘Were you there when I laid the foundations of the earth?’ It took Job to another level. We’re part of something much bigger and more mysterious than the seemingly overwhelming nature of our worries. It’s often owing to not being able to see the whole picture that our worry feels so great. But the picture is known to the painter. The redemption is woven in somehow.

Furthermore, creation was *abundant* and *good*. When we worry, it’s often that there won’t be enough of something – or that things will go badly for us. For all its calamities it is still a world ‘charged with the grandeur of God’. There is still a goodness ‘deep down things’ because everything we are, the whole created order, is sustained by his love.

When we fear God is not good, that God doesn’t care, that God is silent, Scripture reminds us ‘he who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?’ (Romans 8:32).

And Jesus says the same. Your heavenly Father knows what you need. He clothes the birds of the air and the grass of the field, so don’t stress about maintaining your own life in your own strength. Although you are little, you are precious.

An illustration to end. On Friday I took my cat to the vet. As we waited, a boy of about 20 brought in a small Tupperware box with some kitchen roll in it, with some sort of creature inside. He told the receptionist he’d been

convalescing this little thing for 7 months, after having rescued it from somewhere. Its eye had popped out of its socket and its tail had fallen off.

Sitting behind him, I didn't have a good view, but given how small it clearly was, I could not for the life of me imagine what it was that the two veterinary nurses were cooing over. At one point he put the creature tenderly into the palm of his hand. It was a sort of orange colour. Apparently, it was a gecko. The lad described how he'd massaged the side of its face for three hours in an attempt to get the eye to pop back in.

It was a little picture of how God, so immense and gracious, cares for us who are so tiny and apparently insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

I'm going to end with a verse that has come to mean a lot to me lately in what has felt like rather an anxious phase of my life. There are four significant words in the verse, and it's a couplet, so it's easy to memorise (Isaiah 30:5, translated by Martin Laird). May it be a prayer for us to take away this morning:

“By **waiting** and by **calm** you shall be saved. In **quiet** and in **trust** your strength lies.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.