

Worry Works

Sunday 25 May 2008 Rev Lance Thomas
Matthew 6:25-34

A few months ago we had a situation in the church where I felt we had let somebody down. We could have done more to acknowledge and support this person. I felt personally responsible, I should do something about it. Between 2am and 3,30am, the early hours of a Tuesday morning, I pay awake playing over and over again in my head what I could have done and more importantly what I was going to do the next day to put things right. I played out in my mind what I was going to say and how it might work when I would make a visit in the morning. I arrived at work a bit apprehensive, probably not as sharp as I would have been if I had had a full nights sleep! One of the first things I did was to go into Christine's office, she is our pastoral care co-ordinator, and tell her what I was planning to do. She informed me she had been to see this person the previous day. She had said what needed to be said. The situation was in hand. I had wasted more than two hours of precious sleep worrying about something that was already being taken care of.

As I drove into work on Thursday morning I had the car radio on and people were being interviewed about what they hoped to get out of the budget. Without exception each person interviewed focussed on themselves, what they expected and how they would struggle to cope unless the government gave them the relief they deserved. I arrived thinking, man are we a self focussed bunch. That night on the news we heard arguments about whether it was a block of cheese or a block and a half of cheese we would receive weekly in tax relief. This in a news hour that included 80,000 killed in China, 2½ million people homeless and in desperate threat of survival in Myanmar. We worry about the cost of filling up our cars, many of us more than one. In fact we seem to worry about nearly everything. What people think of us, what we look like, the colour of our hair, the shape of our bodies, whether our children will do well, we worry about what is well. Are we in the right job? How we will pay the bills? Are we getting the best return on our investments? We worry about our health, we even worry about the effect of worry on our health. It wouldn't be unreasonable to conclude that worry is part of the human condition. That we are somehow wired up to worry. Not everyone is a lie-in-bed, 2am in the morning worrier like me. But worry does seem to be something we all pretty much have in common.

I didn't used to worry about worry, but lately I have been convicted, that worry is not actually part of the human condition, it is not something we are wired up for. On the contrary, worry is sin and it is right up there with the most destructive sinful actions and habits in our lives. Some people might respond – worry up there with the best/worst of sin, it doesn't even feature in the Ten Commandments! That may be true but the ten commandments haven't put sin a box. One of the cornerstones of my faith is Jesus' words 'I come to give you life, life in all its fullness'. Proceeding those he says, he doesn't come to steal life. For me one definition of sin is anything, any thought, any action, any attitude, any words, anything at all that steals life, our own or others. If that is a reasonable definition of sin, then worry is right up there with the best/worst of them. One of the sayings we put up on the screen, is that worry never actually sorts anything out for tomorrow, it just robs today of its joy.

Our scripture this morning has Jesus making some pretty strong comments about worry. I think we need to be clear that Jesus is not teaching a rebellious, couldn't-care-less attitude to life. I don't think he is advocating that we don't think about things, but I do think he is going as far as forbidding anxious care-filled, fearful worry that robs all the joy out of life.

Jesus' teaching builds on the teaching of the Jewish Rabbis. The Rabbis argued for a combination of good sense and serenity. They said teach your son a trade for not to teach your son a trade is to teach him to steal. But balancing that they said the person who has a loaf of bread in their basket and asks 'what will I eat tomorrow?' lacks faith. And that's where Jesus picks up the debate. In the nine verses here in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus identifies seven things about worry. Five of them, on why we shouldn't worry and two on how to avoid worry.

1. God gives us the gift of life, surely he can be trusted to sustain the essentials of life. This needs to be put into context. Jesus is talking to people like you and me. The privileged people of the world. His message to the poor and starving of the world, in fact most of his comments about the poor were to place the responsibility of their care upon the likes of us who have so much and yet we worry about ourselves. We have life with a capital L. What a gift. We have opportunity and

options. Jesus is saying you have been given so much can you not trust the giver. You even worry about what you will drink, what you will eat, what you will wear and look what you have – get real.

2. Look at the birds of the air – probably no creature on earth works harder than birds do, particularly the small birds they seem to be constantly working away to get a feed. Jesus doesn't say look at the dog or the cat, which seem content to lie around, dependent on others. The bird works hard but it doesn't worry about tomorrow, doesn't store up grain for another day. And you are actually more important to God than the birds of the air.

3. Thirdly worry doesn't work. It actually achieves nothing. You can't add a single hour to a whole lifetime even with a lifetime of worry. In fact I think we have pretty good evidence nowadays to confirm the reverse. Not only does worry add nothing it actively shortens life. Worry is useless.

4. What about the clothes you wear. Just take a look at the flowers of the field, so beautiful yet they are only around for a day. In the clay ovens that were used for cooking in Jesus day, dry grass and flowers were used to accelerate the heat of the oven quickly – here today, thrown into the fire tomorrow. But you here hopefully for 70 plus years, you are so valuable to God. I think this hints a bit about the beauty of human life. I wonder what Jesus makes of our youth obsessed culture. We worry about staying young. Do you not understand beauty. How refreshing it is when we stop worrying about our looks. Peter Brierley said to a group of us the other day –'last time I wore shorts some one said, 'that reminds me I must buy a chicken for tea tonight'!

5. The most telling criticism of worry is that it shows a distrust in God. It's the characteristic of the pagan life. If there is no God, if life is just a meaningless product of the right mix of the ingredients of the universe, then maybe worry is understandable. But not for one who believes in a divine Creator. A God with a plan and purpose for history, a place in that plan and purpose for each of us. Worry is the curse of the unbeliever, not the burden of the believer.

6. So how do we defeat the all too human tendency to worry? Shift our focus off ourselves – life our focus to the Kingdom of God, to God's intention for us and his world. Imagine a world where we could say – don't worry about tax cuts, we're very well off actually, give the billions to the poor, give it to the genuinely hungry and homeless of our world. What a different world that would be.

7. Finally, Jesus says, live one day at a time. Life isn't always easy. There are enough troubles to keep yourself occupied today, but enough space for joy as well. If you add tomorrow's troubles to today's something has got to give.

Worry is needless, it's useless and it can be harmful. The past is past, the future is hardly ever as bad as our fears of it. Look what we have actually come through, look what God has done. Do not worry. Seek first the Kingdom of God and all that is necessary will be given to you.

