

**Do not worry – ‘I am here; I am with you’**  
***(Matthew 6. 25-34 and Romans 8. 18-25)***

“Earlier on today, apparently, a woman rang the BBC and said she had heard a hurricane was on the way. Well, I can assure people watching, don’t worry, there isn’t.”

Those, of course, are the now infamous words of weatherman Michael Fish, speaking back in 1987, just a few hours before the south coast of England was battered by the biggest storm in nearly three centuries. I was 7 floors up at the time in a flimsy 1960s high-rise halls of residence overlooking Battersea Park. And, outside, the trees were being tossed about like ragdolls, while inside students ran terrified from room to room.

There was, it turned out, real reason to be worried.

There are things other than storms, of course, that keep us awake at night. And they fall roughly into two categories, I think – worry about ourselves, and worry for others.

To worry is to be human. Evolutionarily speaking, it’s been critical, actually, to our survival as a species. Often, it’s a valuable part of how we process and safeguard our lives. More often than not, however, worry is a futile thing; a waste of both time and energy. Seldom does it add to life, usually it subtracts.

We all know this, and yet the last thing any of us need at the time is to hear those two well-meaning but infuriating words; ‘don’t worry’.

Which is exactly, of course, what Jesus says at least twice in this extract we’ve just read from, that notoriously challenging Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus' audience had better reason than most to be worried. The majority were trapped in poverty, living hand to mouth within a violent and corrupt military occupation, at a time when human life was extremely cheap. So, when Jesus says 'don't worry' about those most fundamental of things – food, water, clothing – he's asking a lot. From the mouth of anyone else that would have been patronising at best; and at worst just cruel.

If he were addressing us here today, I wonder, what examples might he namecheck?

Don't worry about your job security, your mortgage, your pension, perhaps?

Don't worry about your children, or your parents?

Don't worry about those results, that prognosis?

Don't worry about what other people think?

Take a moment to ask yourself what concerns might Jesus personally highlight for you?

To those first century listeners, Jesus' antidote to worry is to change focus; to 'strive', he says, instead 'for the Kingdom of God and... for God's righteousness'. But what does that mean? We'll come back to that.

Much of the worry that consumes us has its roots in what my son calls First World Problems; in comparison with others, for example, or perfectionism; those impossible standards we set for ourselves and others. We've been sold a toxic ideal which demands that we look a certain way, achieve a certain status, live a certain lifestyle. And it's fed by a culture of aspiration (I need this) and entitlement (I deserve this). The writer Brene Brown talks about the dangers of anxiety as a lifestyle where we live in a constant spiral of negative thinking; where our focus is on what we lack rather than on what we have. When we worry, we give those thoughts power, and within the confines of our minds and imaginations, they grow.

So how do we short circuit that negativity? Well, mindfulness, for instance, would teach us that we are not our thoughts – it would encourage us to be curious, firstly, about the emotional root of what's consuming us; where that

negativity comes from, and then to treat the thought as dispassionately as we can, as an observer – choosing to let it go and let it be.

And that's helpful, I think, but not always easy. More helpful, sometimes, is the simple act of sharing. A problem shared, as they say, is a problem halved. Sharing our anxieties, getting them out of our heads and into words can cut the power source, restore perspective, allow us to exorcise our fears. But that takes courage, sometimes, and vulnerability, and that's not easy for most of us. We tell ourselves we ought to be stronger than this; we ought to be in control; we ought... and, actually, it's this hardening of the 'oughteries' which keeps us spiralling.

For me, the antidote to anxiety as a lifestyle is being able to share my concerns with others, yes, but more importantly with God. Talking this stuff over with God for me diffuses its hold; lifts me out of it momentarily so I can think and see more clearly; it allows me to own my helplessness, and allow God to share the weight of the problem, hold it with me. Prayer is never primarily about changing circumstances; it won't usually fix what causes our worry, but it can change how we feel and respond to it. Prayer primarily is about changing me; giving me the courage and the compassion and whatever other resources I need to live with and through something.

Paul backs that up in his letter to the Philippians.

'Do not be anxious about anything,' he writes, 'but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus'.

Notice he mentions thanksgiving. Again, gratitude defuses anxiety because it restores perspective. We move from glass half empty to glass half full, or simply to being happy just to have a glass.

When Jesus advised his listeners to seek the Kingdom of God instead of the spiral of worry, he was asking them to focus their efforts and attention upon the rule of peace and justice; to take their eyes off themselves and invest in the healing and wellbeing of others. He was advising us not to waste our time and energy on the futility of worry but to put that time and energy into something creative and life-giving. And it is in this reorientation of our lives that we will begin, in fact, to be part of the answer to the prayers and worries of others.

Seek first that Kingdom... and *his righteousness*. That's not a word we often use, apart from perhaps to call someone self-righteous. For me, righteousness just means right-standing with God. Jesus is saying, 'aim for a right-standing with God' or, more accurately, accept that right-standing, because, thankfully, that never has anything to do with performance or being good enough. The problem is that most of us aren't programmed to accept that kind of total acceptance; we want to earn it.

Let me end with a story.

I recently watched a documentary about a Russian teenager called Markus. As a child he was diagnosed with epilepsy and autism, and the doctors at the time recommended to his mother that he be put into a children's home, which his mother declined. From 4 months old he would have painful seizures and each time his mum would whisper constantly in his ear, 'I'm here, I'm with you'. At the age of 6 Markus asked for paper and paint and immediately showed the most extraordinary talent for colour and composition. This mother/son bond would become a major theme in his art, and at the age of 11 he wanted to create a major work, in his words, 'full of care and full of love'. So, he transformed a room in their home, where everything was painted white, and then in black on every surface, Markus painted in Russian the words 'I'm here, I'm with you'.

Maybe those are the words we each need to hear in those moments when anxiety seizes us. Maybe in prayer we can go to that place 'full of care and full of

love', where worry evaporates in Christ's holding, and Christ's peace guards our hearts and minds.

Let's take a moment in the silence to, perhaps, close our eyes and to reflect on what concerns us at this moment. Clench your fists and imagine that what concerns you is held tightly in those clenched fists. Just sit with it, feeling the weight of whatever that is.

And then listen to these words: 'I'm here, I'm with you'.

And as those words begin to come home to you, maybe you could slowly unclench your fist, share, release, surrender that concern, and as your hands open, perhaps you could let them lift slowly into the air; ascend, imagining a letting go, a letting be.