

Sermon for Online Service: Pott Shrigley 7th February, 2021.

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Matthew 6:25-34 *Jesus says, Do Not Worry!*

Don't worry! It might never happen!!

If you are feeling anxious or worried, then such phrases, though well meant, can be less than helpful – or downright annoying!

And we just heard words from Jesus which, on the face of it, don't sound much different.

Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?

And

Don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries.

Both unquestionably true, of course; in fact, profoundly wise. But, on the face of it, not much help if we are feeling imprisoned with anxiety, weighed down with worry. If that is how we feel, then these words don't really offer us a way out from our worries; they don't tell us how to escape from our anxiety.

After all, the world is full of people promising simple and instant solutions to some of life's challenges. In these internet days we get bombarded with them all the time:

This simple trick will burn all your belly fat!

Earn £3000 a month on Amazon!

Play piano like a pro in 30 minutes!

To good to be true? Then it probably is.

And these simple and instant solutions can often be extended to the soul and spirit, too:

Three easy steps to inner peace!

Find true harmony with the world and yourself – today!

When someone makes such promises, we are right to be suspicious.

So, is Jesus any different? Are his words just a glib platitude, or, worse, a false promise?

And, more than that, does he not realise just how much reason I have to be anxious and worried?

OK, let's start with that. Let's acknowledge that worry and anxiety are a part of the human experience – and that to some extent or other we all suffer from them.

By nature, I am a real worry-er. I recall particularly in my teens being almost paralyzed with worry at times. I always seemed to have a worry on the go – something which would keep me awake at night, or which I would recall with dread soon after waking. Some years later I had a friend who had had an accident, a blow to the head, which had somehow left him without the capacity to feel anxious: now I'm quite sure that that was not a good thing – but I recall asking, only half-jokingly, if he could arrange for me to have the same accident!

And, of course, many are far worse than me; while others are blessed with a make-up which is less prone to worry.

But it's not just about our make-up: our life situations, things which happen to us, can increase our anxiety levels. So it's not at all surprising to read, during this past Children's Mental Health Week, that 31% of children in the UK currently suffer with feelings of anxiety. Or that recent figures show anxiety levels in our society currently at their highest since last April. I hardly need to mention the plethora of reasons that our current situation leaves people of all ages, and in many different situations, extremely anxious and worried. And who can blame them?

So, yes, it *is* human to feel anxiety, and Jesus is not here condemning you for your worries. Please don't think, if you are a worrier, that there is no hope for you; or that Jesus doesn't understand your feelings and your fears.

But this same Jesus said '*I have come that they may have life, life in all its fulness*'. And if you have known anxiety at any level you will know how quickly and easily it robs you of the joy, the freedom the peace which Jesus promises can be ours. It would be strange if Jesus were *not* concerned to free us from it; if he were happy just to leave us fretting and fearing, saying, 'well, they're bound to worry – you can't really blame them.'

So, I think we can assume that his words to us here are more than just glib phrases; that he really does offer us a route out of our anxiety.

Let's look a bit deeper into what he says.

I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing?

Jesus was talking to people living a very different life to ours, but one which many do live in our world today; the life of a subsistence farmer. Growing just enough food for the family, a subsistence farmer has few reserves, and, while he might eat today, can't be sure about

tomorrow – or, at least, next week or next month. If the next crop fails, or the animals die, there is no plan B.

In that situation, I can well imagine that the essentials of life – food, clothing – can be a constant, nagging source of worry. By any human standard they had very good ground for anxiety. You can imagine the parents constantly checking their meagre supply of grain, mentally calculating how many more meals they had for their children.

And Jesus knew this: indeed, he shared that same lifestyle.

So what does he ask them to do? Not just blindly to believe that all will somehow be well. But he asks them to change their focus. Yes, you can keep checking that grain store, anxiously focussing on the dwindling pile in the corner; or you can put your focus somewhere else – on God.

To quote from the performance poet Phil Howe, from whom we just heard: he repeated those three words ‘Do Not Worry’; and then he asked,

How do we do this with all the uncertainty, angst, unknown?

Well, the good news from the Bible is that there’s someone on the throne.

Jesus’ answer to worry is to remind us who is in charge. And to invite us to place our focus there, rather than on the problems facing us: Look up to Heaven, not down on the Ground. Fill your vision with the one who has infinite resources, rather than with the limiting and limited problems you see around you.

So, ok, focus upwards on God, not downwards on your problems. Fair enough. But how to actually *do* this? Just try and think holy thoughts? I’m not so good at that, either!

Fortunately, the Bible gives us a pattern – and it doesn’t depend on how good you are at holy thoughts! We are invited rather to look at the evidence; to find solid reasons for believing that God has us and our situation firmly in his hands.

As so often, Jesus starts with the evidence to hand: he says, **‘Look Around’**.

Look at the birds. They don’t plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them.

Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don’t work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are.

And aren’t you far more valuable to him than they are?

But that’s not all; there is far more evidence than birds and flowers, the world around us. Very often Jesus adopts a fundamental Jewish approach, which is: **‘Look Back’**. Look back at

God's mighty acts in the past. Supremely, the Jews looked back to God's deliverance of them from slavery in Egypt – the Exodus, with Moses.

And as Christians, we still are invited to 'look back'; our Holy Book – the Bible – is primarily an account of all the amazing things God has done in his interaction with the human race. We are invited through its every page to understand that this God, who did these things, is our God, and he has not changed.

And this 'looking back' culminates in the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. A sign of how much God is willing to do for us. As Paul writes in the letter to the Romans, *He gave us his Son, will he not also freely give us all things?!*

Not so different from Jesus own words:

if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?!

And there's another string to this bow. For the Christian can also look back on their own experience of God's love, his provision, his guidance. And again, the message is the same: God who cared for you, showed himself faithful to you, in the past has not changed.

So, we focus on God, we **Look Up**: but we do it by **Looking Around**, and by **Looking Back**.

But, in closing, I'd like to add one more: **Look Closely**.

What do I mean? Well, it's all too easy to assume that the evidence we are looking for, the evidence that God does care for us, will be in grand spectacular events and actions. But God often speaks in a still, small voice. We have to listen carefully – and look closely – to see him at work. So please, develop a habit of looking closely, looking to see where you can spot signs of God's grace in your life, and your situation, however small. Train your eyes, and you will spot more and more of them, until they are too many to count – abit like staring into a starry sky. And, almost without noticing, you will find that your vision of God and his work in your life increases: and the size of your worries decreases.

That's the meaning of the old song:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in His wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.*

Amen.

