

Anxiety. Matthew 6. 25-34. Augusta. November 2008.

I want to speak this evening on the subject of 'anxiety' – and our reading comes from the closing section of Matthew 6 – breaking in at verse 25.

In our reading, Jesus uses the words 'take thought' no less than six times. As you know, in modern English this is not now a particularly happy – or accurate – translation. The word which Jesus used means rather 'concern or *anxious* thought' – in the context here, 'anxiety and worry'.

The Lord *opens* by referring to a state of anxiety, saying literally, 'Don't be continually worrying about your life ...', v. 25, and *closes* by referring to a single anxious thought, 'Don't worry at all or ever about tomorrow' – not even once, v. 34.

Our Lord's teaching is concerned specifically with food and clothing. And before we go any further – I need to make it clear that not *all* forms of anxiety are wrong. In 2 Corinthians 11, for example, Paul – having (very reluctantly) catalogued his impressive list of sufferings for Christ – spoke in verse 28 of 'that which comes upon me daily (that which daily conspires against me – that which daily rushes and presses on me) – the care of all the churches' – where he used the very same word – anxious thought and worry – which Jesus did in our reading. The apostle also used the same word when commending Timothy to the Philippians – 'I have no man likeminded', he wrote – 'who will naturally (who will genuinely) *care* (be anxious) for your state – for all seek their own – not the things which are Jesus Christ's', 2. 20. Concern and care about the spiritual state of others is most certainly a *good* thing.

In Matthew 6, our Lord is speaking about something very different – about food and clothing – about things which we regard as the necessities of life. And rightly so, for He says later, 'your heavenly Father knows that you *need* them'. And I guess that few – if any – of us ever have any reason to worry about the provision of our food or our clothing. Most of us have far, far more than we *need*. But the argument runs, that, if there is no justification for us getting stressed about the so-called necessities of life, we have absolutely *no excuse* for getting stressed about the lesser things we so often do.

I said that few – if any – of us have reason to worry about our food or clothing. But there are exceptions. Some time ago I was in contact with a Christian young lady in London who has what is known as Crohn's disease - an inflammatory bowel disease. In one of her emails, she wrote, 'I've just spent another two weeks in hospital after being admitted as an emergency. There was some complication possibly with my Crohn's disease, but more likely an infection at the site of my operation. I am now out of hospital ... The main thing is that I am not allowed to eat anything at the moment. I drink cartons of medicated drinks which give me all the nutrition I need and help to maintain my weight, which I had been losing fast, whilst giving my body a rest from having to digest anything too much. I have been told by my dietician this morning that I will stay on this for another month'.

She later sent me a further note, in which she said, 'I've been receiving encouragement from Matthew 6 recently because it refers to the very things I would be worrying about – what I will eat and what I will wear, because I've lost weight'. So there are exceptions – even in the affluent West.

The first point Jesus makes, verse 25, is that worrying and fretting about such matters as food and clothing is altogether **unnecessary**. For there are even *more* important things – '*life*' – for which we want food and drink – and '*the body*' – for which we want clothing. By implication, the Lord was saying that – if God has given us *life* – and He has – we can surely count on Him to provide what is necessary to maintain that life. And if God has given us a *body* – and He has – we can surely count on Him to provide us with a covering for that body. That the One who is intelligent and powerful enough to have created both life and the body in the first place, is surely able to provide food and clothing to meet the need of both.

But worry, our Lord continued, is not only unnecessary – it is **blind**. Quite likely gesturing in the direction of the birds above His head and the flowers at His feet, He invited His disciples to 'behold the fowls of the air', and to 'consider (to see) the lilies of the field'. Anxiety, He argued, is blind to God's providential care all around us. Leading His disciples into the classroom of the natural world, He invited them to open their eyes and to think about what they saw there. For the creation around us testifies – not only to God's 'eternal power and divinity', Rom. 1. 20, but equally to His providence. 'Look at the birds', Jesus said – the point being that the birds of the air make no long-term provision for their future. They don't sow, reap, or gather grain into barns – whoever saw a sparrow or a raven driving a tractor or a combine harvester? Yet God feeds them – in that He provides the wherewithal for them to gather and to eat – to sustain their short existence here¹ Similarly, the lilies of the field neither *toil* to produce raw-material, nor *spin* to manufacture the material once produced – whoever saw a lily or any other flower work a sewing machine? Yet God clothes them – and how!

Not – please – that Jesus is arguing against prudent planning and forethought. He is in the business of attacking corroding care and worry – not in the business of commending carelessness, lack of preparation or laziness.

In the context of such basic needs as food, Paul made it clear to the Thessalonians, 'mind your own business ('sweep around your own front door'), and work with your own hands ... that you may lack nothing', 1 Thess. 4.11-12, and, again, 'if anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they *work* in quietness and eat their *own* bread', 2 Thess. 3.10-12.

Indeed, the very birds of which Jesus spoke – by God-given instinct, exercise ample forethought in busily searching for the food which God provides for them. 'Your heavenly Father feeds them', Jesus says – but that doesn't mean that He throws the food into their nests or drop it into their beaks!

And note the way in which Jesus introduces God here as 'your heavenly Father'. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus had taught *the disciples* to address God as their 'Father'. And some bombshell *that* was! But if He is in reality a Father, then His children can confidently trust His fatherly love. Speaking of the birds, Jesus says, 'Are you (and the word is emphatic) not much better than they?' - are you not much more valuable than they? For God isn't the Father of the lesser and irrational creatures in the same way in which He is to those He numbers among His children. Make no mistake, Jesus is saying, the heirs of heaven are of far greater value to God than are the birds of heaven. And so, if God feeds the birds and clothes the flowers, dare we imagine that He will allow His own children to starve or go naked?

Turning to the lilies, Jesus says that 'even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed (was not dressed) like one of these'. Gazing on the wealth of gorgeous flowers decking the hills of Galilee in the spring, Jesus contrasts *their* beauty with the magnificent wardrobe of Solomon. King Solomon had been the wealthiest and most extravagant of Israel's monarchs. Possessing a fleet of ships which brought him the products of many foreign countries, he was well-placed to dress himself (as the form of the verb suggests) in the most splendid of royal apparel. But Solomon's fine and elegant robes were, Jesus said, outshone by the exquisite beauty of a common flower.

Yet 'the grass of the field', Jesus says – the word 'grass' which Jesus used being sufficiently broad to include the lovely lilies – 'is here for a short time only', and – in the land of Israel – was destined when it withered to be thrown into the oven – to be used as fuel in baking bread. If God then clothes with such beauty the flowers which soon perish – surely, Jesus argues, He can be counted on to provide a covering for those who will live forever – although not, of course, in these natural bodies.

Jesus traces our needless worry (note that word 'needless') ultimately to lack of faith. 'O you of little faith?', He says, verse 30. Worry of this kind is really unbelief in disguise. For us to be anxious about the provision of that which is necessary to sustain and support life is to betray scant faith indeed in God's promises, power and providence. Such anxiety is to doubt His *love* because it implies that my Father doesn't care for me enough to provide for me – it is to doubt His *wisdom* because it implies that He doesn't know what is for my best – and it is to doubt His *power* because it implies that He lacks the ability to meet my needs. And such anxious doubting isn't only upsetting and distressing for me – it is an affront to my God – it is *highly* dishonouring to Him. How do we imagine He must feel? How would *any* father worth the name feel if his children betrayed the slightest suspicion that he was either unable or unwilling to look after them? And I need to remember this when I worry about His provision for me!

But worry, Jesus says, isn't only unnecessary and blind – it is altogether **futile** – useless – it accomplishes nothing positive, verse 27. 'Which of you by anxious thought – by worrying – can add one cubit (about 18 inches) to his stature?' – not, I suppose, that many of us would regard that as our highest priority in life. Alas, some of us have far more reason to be concerned about our width than our height. These words could equally be rendered, 'Which of you by anxious thought can add the shortest period to his life?' It isn't easy to decide between the two possible translations of Jesus' words – but either rendering is true enough – anxiety isn't going to make us *grow any taller* nor is it going to make us *live any longer* – indeed, if anything it is likely to shorten our lives.

'And so', Jesus said, 'take no anxious thought, saying, what shall we *eat*? Or what shall we *drink*? Or what shall we *wear*?' And we do well to remember that, though He was indeed the Son of God, *He* was no stranger to such physical needs Himself. He knew full well what He was talking about. He commenced His public work on earth *hungry* - eating nothing for 40 days – and we know He hungered at least *once* again - one morning during so-called Passion Week as He entered Jerusalem.² Enter Jesus and exit one barren fig tree! And He knew what it was to be *thirsty* - on more than one occasion (whether sitting on a well in John 4 or hanging on a cross in John 19) - and He ended His life here on earth *stripped of His clothing* when nailed to that cross for our sins. Yet *He* never worried about what He ate, what He drank, or with what He was clothed.

'Food, drink and clothing', Jesus says, 'are the things which the gentiles (the pagans) seek after', verse 32. 'But' He adds, 'Your heavenly Father knows that you have need of all these things'. Let the heathen – if he will – be anxious – after all, he knows nothing of a Father in heaven. But anxiety and worry about such things are totally

unworthy of a Christian. And what use is all our knowledge of the Christian faith if we live in the same anxious and distrustful manner as the heathen?

As has often been pointed out, the New Testament offers a threefold antidote to anxious care and worry. That God knows our needs is the *first* ingredient. The apostle Paul supplies the *second* in his letter to the Philippians – ‘Be careful (anxious) about nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes (which surpasses; is better than) understanding, shall keep (guard) your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus’, 4. 6-7. In nothing worry; in everything pray.

And in some ways it is hardly surprising that Paul should have so much to say about prayer to the Philippians. The assembly had been born in an atmosphere of prayer – remember how, in Acts 16, Luke twice speaks of the ‘place of prayer’ – once in connection with the conversion of Lydia, and once in connection with the deliverance of the girl fortune-teller – and then of the jailer’s conversion following Paul and Silas’s midnight prayers and praises.

And don’t miss Paul’s expression ‘with thanksgiving’. For, when it comes to anxiety, many of us suffer from short-term memories. We become so concerned with our perceived problems *in the present and the future* that we lose sight of the innumerable ways in which God has proved Himself, has cared for us and has met our every need *in the past*.

Perhaps in the light of our Lord’s words in verse 32, ‘Your heavenly Father *knows* that you have need of all these things’, Paul’s exhortation ‘*make known* your requests to God’ read rather strange. The more so given that the Lord had said a little earlier, in the context of prayer, ‘your Father *knows* the things you have need of *before you ask Him*’, v. 8. But in the end it is for God, and not for us, to reconcile such matters – if they need to be reconciled at all. It’s certainly not something for us to get *anxious* and *worried* about! Clearly, just as an earthly father knows the needs of his children, and yet teaches them *to ask* him to meet those needs – that they might develop a sense of dependence confidence and trust – so God deals with us His children.

And in making known our requests, the automatic consequence, Paul says, is the enjoyment of God’s own peace – to repel (fend off) all crippling anxiety, and to mount guard of our hearts and minds – when we experience something of the serenity and calm which surrounds the throne of the Majesty (the Greatness) in the heavens. How my worries and problems suddenly shrink when dragged before the throne of *God*. And the throne of grace is truly a wonderful place. As is often said, it is where the burdens shift from our shoulders to His – where our needs and requests encounter heaven’s infinite resources – and where we trade our anxieties for God’s peace. God hears our requests – that’s the second ingredient.

The *third* is supplied by the apostle Peter; ‘Casting all your care (your anxiety) on him for He cares for you’, 1 Pet. 5. 7. Peter’s original readers had every cause for anxiety – they certainly faced more than their fair share of trials. In the present, many of them suffered simply for being Christians, and the prospects for the future were even worse. In rather ominous words, the apostle warned them that the time had come for ‘judgement to begin with the house (or ‘household’) of God’, 4. 16-17. The storm clouds were gathering!!

In chapter 5 verse 7, Peter is alluding to Psa. 55. 22. Although this verse is more familiar to *us* through the language of the KJV as ‘Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee’, *Peter* (who lacked the benefit of having the KJV!) would have read it in his Greek Old Testament – which rendered the opening of the verse, ‘Cast your *care* (your anxiety – the word of 1 Peter 5) on the Lord’. But to stifle any remaining doubts on the part of his suffering and persecuted brethren, Peter adds – and indeed emphasises – the word ‘all’.

At the end of chapter 2 of his letter, he had referred to Isaiah 53, ‘All we like sheep have gone astray ... turned everyone ...’, which continues, as Peter knew well, ‘and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all’. And was He able to carry – to bear – the weight of all the iniquities – of all the sins which God laid on Him? Oh, yes – most certainly He was! And so Peter prefixed his quote from Isaiah 53. 6 with ‘who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree’, 1 Pet. 2. 24. Now Peter insists that his persecuted and suffering readers cast their cares where their sins were once laid! ‘*On Him!*’ And we too should cast all our cares where all our sins were laid – knowing that the One who so wonderfully bore the second can assuredly bear the first!

And this, Peter says, ‘for He cares for you’ - literally ‘for it matters to Him about you’. In John 10, Jesus spoke of the hireling. ‘I am the good shepherd’, He said, ‘the good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But the hireling, who is not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees. And the wolf catches and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling, and cares not for the sheep (literally, ‘it matters not to him about the sheep’).

It doesn’t matter to the hireling about the sheep. It matters to the hireling only about the hireling! But Peter assures us that it most certainly matters to the Shepherd of our souls – to whom we have now returned – about us His sheep, 1 Pet. 2. 25!

Be on your way then, anxiety and worry – for the Lord *knows*, the Lord *hears* and the Lord *cares*.

'But seek first', Jesus demands, verse 33, 'God's kingdom and his righteousness'. That is, be concerned - above everything else - with the rule of God in your life - with what He requires of you. Seeking God's will and God's way is the first priority. 'And all these things shall be added to you' – by God, that is. As we noted, the Lord Jesus had previously pointed out that anxious thought cannot 'add' anything to us, v. 27. In adding 'all these things' to us, God will therefore do for us what no amount of anxious thought can ever do! In other words, 'If we concern ourselves with God's interests, we can be assured that God will concern himself with ours'.

And what about the *future*? Our Lord's message about anxiety ended with a reference to the morrow. 'Don't worry about tomorrow', He said, 'for tomorrow will worry about itself. Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof' – in other words, 'Each day has enough trouble of its own'. The Lord wasn't saying that it's wrong to plan or make preparations for the future. It is, of course, essential that we plan for the future – the apostle Paul did it constantly, for example – on one occasion (in Romans 15) providing us with a page out of his busy schedule – in which were detailed his plans to go from Corinth to Jerusalem, then to Rome - and using Rome as his springboard – his launching-pad – to reach as far as Spain - which he may or may not have ever succeeded in doing.

No, the Lord wasn't forbidding us to *think* about tomorrow – or to plan for it – He was forbidding us to *worry* about it. The point is that God doesn't chew *His* fingernails over the future – and He doesn't want us to chew ours either.

All too often, we foolishly increase our burdens in the present by bringing forward the perceived problems of the future. Jesus points out that each day has its own quota of troubles – and for us to bring forward tomorrow's troubles into today is simply to double them up. And what does all this anxiety about tomorrow achieve? It doesn't empty tomorrow of its troubles, but it does empty today of its strength. Surprise, surprise – today's grace is sufficient only for today and should not be wasted on tomorrow. For in the end, God provides us with our strength on the same basis as He provides us with our bread, v. 11 – on a *daily basis*. And it is foolish in the extreme to try to carry tomorrow's load with today's strength. We can be confident that, if tomorrow *does* bring fresh troubles, God will provide us with fresh grace to meet them.

The poet captured well the spirit of what Jesus says in verse 34 :

I have nothing to fear from tomorrow –
My Saviour will make that His care.
If it brings me trouble and sorrow,
He'll help me to suffer and bear.

*I have nothing to fear from tomorrow –
Its burdens, then, why should I share?
Its grace and its strength I can't borrow,
Then why should I borrow its care?*³

[Those two lines are really something!]

I close with a quote from one of Corrie Ten Boom's books – '*He is More Than Able*'

'Many years ago, shortly after World War II had come to a close, I was invited to speak in a Japanese church in Tokyo. The nation was still reeling from the impact of the war. All that the Japanese people had believed in had been snatched away, and two of their greatest cities had been destroyed by the atomic bomb. If ever a people had reason to worry, it was the Japanese. Because of the language barrier, it seemed sensible for me to give them an object lesson.

"Do you know the feeling", I began, "when your heart is like a suitcase with a heavy load?" The sad-faced people in the little church all nodded. They knew the feeling.

I picked up my suitcase and put it on the table. It was very heavy [*the suitcase, I assume, not the table!*]. I told them how weary I was from tramping all over the world, carrying that suitcase filled with heavy objects. "My heart was like that until just last week, when I read a glorious verse in the Bible. It says, 'Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you'. And I did that. I brought all my burdens to the Lord—all my cares—and I cast them upon Him". I opened my suitcase and spread it out on the table to demonstrate. "Lord", I continued, "here are my co-workers. They are so tired". I reached down and took two items out of the suitcase and laid them on the table.

"And here is my trip. Lord—the one I have to make next week to the town where I don't know a single person. You know how worried I am about that, and how afraid I get when I think about it. I cast this care on You, too. Lord". I took a big package out of the suitcase and laid it on the table next to the two smaller packages. "Here are my friends at home. Lord. They wrote about a car accident. Will You please heal them?" I took out one more object

and placed it on the table. I took object after object out of the suitcase, mentioning each one as a particular burden or worry.

In the end, the suitcase was empty. I closed the empty suitcase and pretended to walk out of the room, swinging my light bag as though it were made of paper. The people immediately got my point, and the light of understanding broke on their faces. I could tell by their smiles and polite bows when I was finished that the Holy Spirit had spoken to them.

After the meeting I quickly threw all the items back into the suitcase and dashed off with my host, to go to the home of the wonderful Japanese Christians who entertained me until it was time to fly on to Hong Kong.

Many years passed, and then I found myself in Berlin, at an international congress on evangelism. After one of the morning seminars, a distinguished-looking Japanese evangelist approached me. "Corrie ten Boom", he said with a broad smile, "every time I hear your name, I think of your trouble suitcase?"

"Oh", I said, flattered, "I am glad you remembered what I said that night". "It was not what you said that I remember", he smiled courteously, "it is what you did". "Oh, taking all those objects out of my suitcase", I said, "and laying them on the table as an illustration of how to pray?"

"No, that is not what I remember most", he said. "What I remember most is that after you finished your talk, you took all the objects, put them all back in your suitcase, and walked out of the hall just as burdened as when you came in!"

That afternoon, back in my hotel room, I began to take a good look at myself. Was I doing that? How easy it is to unpack my trouble suitcase each morning and cast all my cares on the Lord, because He cares for me. But then, as the day goes on, I keep coming back and picking up first this care and then that one, slipping them back into my suitcase. By the end of the day, I am just as burdened as I was at the beginning.'

Some time ago I shared this extract from Corrie Ten Boom's book with the young lady in London who I mentioned earlier – the one with Crohn's disease. I received an email back, in which she commented, 'It is definitely a minute by minute task to leave our worries with God and not end up with them back in our 'trouble suitcase!' And, given her situation, I could understand why. But I have a sneaking suspicion that the Lord often takes a look into *my* 'trouble suitcase' – only to ask, 'Malcolm, 'Why do *you* always insist on repacking this suitcase almost as soon as we empty it?'

'Never a trial that He is not there,
Never a burden that He doth not bear
Never a sorrow that He doth not share—
Moment by moment I'm under His care.'⁴

Footnotes

¹ Psa. 104. 27-28.

² Matt. 4. 2; 21. 18.

³ Major D. W. Whittle, quoted 'Pentecostal Evangel', 21 May 1978, page 3.

⁴ 'While I was attending the World's Fair in Chicago, Henry Varley, a lay preacher from London, said to Major Whittle: "*I do not like the hymn 'I need Thee every hour' very well, because I need Him every moment of the day*". Soon after Major Whittle wrote this sweet hymn...[He] brought the hymn to me in manuscript a little later, saying that he would give me the copyright of both the words and music if I would print for him five hundred copies on fine paper, for distributing among his friends. His daughter, May Whittle, who later became the wife of Will R. Moody, composed the music. I did as Mr. Whittle wished; and I sent the hymn to England, where it was copyrighted on the same day as at Washington. In England the hymn became very popular. Falling into the hands of the well-known Rev. Andrew Murray, of South Africa, then visiting London, he adopted it as his favourite hymn. A year later Mr. Murray visited Northfield, and while holding a meeting for men in the church he remarked, "If Sankey only knew a hymn which I found in London, and would sing it, he would find that it embraces my entire creed". I was very anxious to know what hymn it was, and when he had recited it I said to him: "Doctor, that hymn was written within five hundred yards of where we are standing".'

Ira Sankey, 'My Life and the Story of the Gospel Hymns'. Harper & Brothers, 1906.