

Sermon for Second before Lent. Do not Worry!

Romans 8:18 - 25

18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. 19 For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. 20 For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? 25 But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

Matthew 6

25 "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?

28 "So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; 29 and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 30 Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

31 "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32 For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Have you ever had cause to worry?

I know I have. More times than I care to think about, I will tell you about just one...

Towards the end of my time in Durham training to be a Minister I heard from the Diocese of Leicester that they had arranged a Curacy for me. That's how it works, a Diocese sends you for training to a Theological College in the hope you come back for your Curacy. Like many professions, Ministers in the Church of England do their academic training first, then go on to complete their training on the job in their first post.

We were hoping to return to Leicester, that is where most of my family is, and that is where most of my wife's family live too. We had been away for two years and wanted to go home, and I was pleased that the Diocese thought me worth having back.

I wasn't entirely keen on the church they had suggested, it was a perfectly good church, but it was not quite what I had been hoping for. Anyway I phoned up the Vicar and greeted him with mingled enthusiasm and friendliness, I thought I might as well make a good impression as I was going to have to work with him for at least the next three years. However, he sounded unsure of what I was saying until it finally dawned on him that I was expecting to come to him as a Curate, and the Diocese of Leicester had not told him about it.

There had been a bureaucratic slip, and what was worse, he carefully explained that he did not want a curate, he was sorry – but it just would not work.

Needless to say I was rather alarmed, so I got on the phone to Diocese HQ and asked them what was going on? I was put on hold, but whilst I held the line I could hear a muffled conversation in the background. I then received another apology, this time from the Diocese, and this time with some even more worrying news – there were no other Curacies to be had in the Diocese.

Now I was really concerned, I had given up a perfectly good job to train for the ministry, and we had a home and life in Leicester that we had left behind, and now what? It suddenly seemed that I had been pitched into a swirling sea of uncertainty because of an administrative error. I was, as our first reading has it – 'groaning'!

I felt let down by the Diocese where once I had felt very much supported. I did not know at the time, because they did not think to tell me, but the staff at the Diocese were working to find a

solution to the problem. However, the Church of England proceeds slowly, and as the days and weeks went by nothing seemed to be happening to resolve the problem.

I was not quite so slow off the mark, and fired off a letter to the Bishop. A letter which at the time I thought a model of restraint and reason, but which on reflection may possibly have been less than wise.

Now, some of you may be thinking that I was worrying about nothing. All I can say is that it worried me deeply; I lost sleep over it, it wriggled into my thoughts again and again no matter what I was doing, I was by turns angry and panicked – I did not know if I would have a job or a home in six months' time.

It even irked me that I was worried, I was supposed to be becoming a Vicar, surely I should have been able to pray and trust God? His care had got me thus far and I should have trusted for the future, but no. I knew I shouldn't worry, but I did.

Ever felt like that?

Worry is insidious, it works its way in to your consciousness and there it goes round and round, becoming more terrible on each circuit across your brain, like some mad run away locomotive, and for some demented reason you heap on fuel and the thing picks up momentum and hurtles on.

Worry is destructive; it debilitates your life, robs you of your peace, setting off other apparently unrelated worries in your head, and leaves you tired out. It is good to care, it is good to feel injustice and to determine to work for a better world, even fear has a purpose, fear can help keep us out of trouble, but worry – what good is that?

And what good is it Jesus or anyone else telling us not to worry?

Whilst still in a perplexed state of mind, and finding we had a Sunday free, Jacqui and I drove up to Lindisfarne for the day. If you have not been to Lindisfarne I recommend it to you, especially if you are feeling perturbed. There is a wonderful feeling of peace about the place, I think in part because it becomes an island when cut off by the flowing tide, and also because of its isolation and its ancient religious history, it seems to be a place of deep meaning.

The Bishop of Argyll and The Isles was also visiting, and he took the Sunday service. He preached on the topic of not worrying. I can't remember his whole sermon, but this I heard and remembered - that you were not to worry about the future as it does not belong to you, it belongs to God.

The future as it does not belong to you, it belongs to God.

I remember thinking that this was quite an uncompromising message, but I could think of no reason to object to it. As King David prayed, 'Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour,

for everything in heaven and earth is yours.'

Everything – that includes the future. The future is God's responsibility not ours, the future is not within our remit. We are called to faithfully serve God in this present time and place, not only is it pointless to worry about the future, it is to totally overstep our mark as servants of God.

Fundamentally we worry about things over which we have no power or influence, it is this very lack of control that causes our nervousness, but as Christians we should know almighty God loves us, and holds our future in His hands. The deal is not that nothing bad will befall us, although most of what we worry about does not come to pass, the deal is God can see us through troubles if we follow the way of Jesus.

It was an uncompromising message but it worked on me, I came out of that church with my worries blown clear away somewhere beyond Cuthbert's island. Over the next few days I found that I was still concerned about the situation, but it was a concern that I owned and did not own me.

Jesus doesn't just tell us not to worry, he gives us the key to not worrying, 'seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.' In recognising the sovereignty of God over my future I had acknowledged the Kingdom of God and placed it first. It is about who is in charge.

It's a bit like this, I have a Jack Russell Terrier called Hector, after the hero of Troy. Like most terriers he is a bit of a worrier, I sometimes think terriers have the worries of a bigger dog in their compact little bodies. Hector worries about all sorts of things, he worries about who is

going by the house, he worries about who is at the door, he worries about odd sounds in the distance, all of which I can see he need not worry about. If only he would trust me and realise that who is at the door is my responsibility not his, that whoever is walking by the house is beyond his realm of concern, and that the odd sounds in the distance are beyond his doggy remit, in other words if only he could acknowledge his limitations and accept my care for him. Hector needs to know that I am in charge, not him. Perhaps naming him Hector after the hero of Troy was a mistake, I think it might have given him ideas above his station.

A few days after my trip to Lindisfarne the Diocese of Leicester offered me a curacy at All Saints Loughborough, which proved the right place for me to be.

Interesting that God waited until I stopped worrying to answer that prayer.

So I learned at the start of my ministerial career that the Church of England can be frustratingly bureaucratic, slow to amend errors, and really poor at communication, and that I couldn't make it otherwise by firing letters at it. I also learnt I was going to need to seek God's Kingdom in this if I was to serve him in this time and place.

Seek God's Kingdom and 'do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things.'

Amen.