

## Sermon – Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> February 2020 – 9.30 am

I'd like you to imagine a worry spectrum across the front of the building. At this end of the spectrum, on the North side of the church building, is the end of the spectrum where there really isn't all that much worry. This is where those of you who are seriously laid back might place yourselves. Those of you for whom worry and anxiety really don't feature a great deal. Of course there could be a range of reasons for this. You may be naturally relaxed; it could be because you don't feel particularly responsible for too much; it could be because you've thought carefully about what is important to you, how you believe you should live, and you consider that for the most part you're doing ok.

And by contrast, right over at the other end of the building, the South side beside the organ, is where those who might call themselves "worriers" reside. If you're the kind of person who tends towards anxiety and will always find something to worry about, this might be where you place yourself. And again, there could be a range of reasons for being a "worrier". You may have had to take responsibility for a great deal in life, perhaps when you haven't always felt well equipped to do so; you may find it really difficult to switch off, almost as though a level of anxiety has become a way of life; you might almost feel that if you're not worrying, something's bound to go wrong; and there are so many things that are not within our control that worry can be a natural response.

Of course many of us would place ourselves somewhere in the middle, perhaps nearer to one end than the other. And it is probably also true to say that there are some things that each of us is more prone to worry about. Anything to do with boilers and their capacity to go wrong will always bring me out in a cold sweat and send me right to the far end of the worry spectrum. You may have your equivalents. And what about those things that matter so much – the health of loved ones being one example? Our worry may not help in any way, but it's pretty hard to be laid back in the face of some situations.

Whenever I hear this morning's gospel reading I find myself conflicted. You see I love the sermon on the mount, of which this is part, and I know that this is some of Jesus's most important teaching. But I also know that many of us worry. And more than that, I know that one of the least helpful things to be told when you're worried about something is, "don't worry."

So what are we to make of this teaching? How can it really help us in our discipleship?

I think the first thing to recognise is that the very fact that Jesus is talking about not worrying suggests that he knows just as well as we do that it is in our nature to worry. That might sound obvious, but it's so important. Because Jesus knows us and loves us. So we really don't become less lovable if we are worriers. More than that, Jesus actually seems to be acknowledging and identifying with our tendency to worry. By the end of today's reading he states as a matter of fact that we shouldn't worry about tomorrow because there are plenty of worries today to be getting on with.

The point about how much we are loved – whether or not we worry – is made in the passage. Matthew, the gospel writer, is deploying an at that time popular technique of arguing from the lesser to the greater. So the point made is that God feeds the birds and "clothes" the lilies because God cares about them. And given that we know God cares even more about us, surely he will feed and clothe us, too. Part of the point of this passage is to remember that we are loved by God – and to keep faith in that love.

The examples given should also make us think. Our initial reaction might be to wonder what it would feel like as someone struggling to feed a family on insufficient funds that God feeds the birds so we don't need to worry. Or indeed someone living in a famine-struck part of the world. But if we take a step back it's also possible to recognise that we all know that there actually is sufficient food to feed the global population. So in one sense God really has provided, and it is other factors that have got in the way to prevent that food from getting to every individual.

Ironically, of course, this may seem to give us more to worry about – but we'll return to that in a moment.

Similarly I love that image of the lilies of the field because I wonder whether it might make us think about some of our anxieties about the way we look – which in today's culture can seem to be given such significance. And I wonder whether we are being reminded that we are all beautiful because we are part of God's beautiful creation.

And perhaps some of this leads us to consider both what it is we are worrying about and the nature of our worry. When Jesus says that God feeds the birds of the air, we also need to remember that the birds don't just sit back in their nests or on their branches and wait for food to arrive. They do, in fact, need to go and find the food. So we aren't being told not to take responsibility for playing our part in God's world. The point is, perhaps, not to become overly anxious about the wrong things, but rather to focus our attention on the right things. We do not need to doubt God's love – that is something that we can always trust. However, we do need to consider our stewardship of the earth's resources. If there is enough for everyone, yet some go hungry, what influence can we have in bringing about greater social justice?

Perhaps the most significant part of Jesus's message comes in that penultimate verse. All that is said about not worrying is set in the context of our priorities in life. Jesus doesn't want us to spend so much time worrying that we ignore the Kingdom of God. The point is that God must come first. I wonder whether you have ever had that experience of being so worried about something that you haven't had time to pray. But then when you have finally spent a bit of time with God you experience significant relief from the worry.

We are called to keep our eyes fixed on God. And to trust that by placing God at the centre of our lives; by trusting in God's love for us and for all creation lives really can be transformed. Wherever you are on the worry spectrum, know that God loves you and allow that gently to change your perspective, alter what you worry about, and see what emerges.

Amen