

MATTHEW 6:25-34 ST JAMES', 19.2.17, 11.00 am

INTRODUCTION

"Don't worry; be happy. . . ." You might have come across this song, which was released in 1988. Looking at the lyrics, the song seems to give two reasons for not worrying: worry doubles your troubles, and worry makes you frown, which brings everybody down.

Jesus also tells us not to worry. And in case we don't get the message, he keeps repeating it: *do not worry . . .* (v 25); *who . . . by worrying can add a single hour to his life?* (v 27); *why so you worry . . . ?* (v 28); *so do not worry . . .* (v 31); *do not worry about tomorrow . . .* (v 34). But Jesus has something much stronger to say than, "Don't worry; be happy". Let's look at what Jesus has to say, and think about his antidotes to worrying.

DON'T WORRY – GOD KNOWS YOUR NEEDS

Imagine having a child who is constantly worrying. "Mummy, are you *sure* we're going to have enough food for tea tonight?" "Daddy, I need clothes so I can go to school." "Grandma, what if we don't have anything to drink?"

If Nathan or Joel asked us questions like this, we'd feel very sad. Part of our job as parents is to provide our children with what they need. It's for us to make sure that they have enough food, drink and clothing. They should know, from experience, that we'll provide for them everything they need.

Now, we're definitely not perfect parents! Sometimes we forget that one of them needs new trousers, or ingredients for a cookery lesson, or money for a school trip. Human parents aren't perfect; some leave their children to worry constantly about where the next meal, or essential clothes, are going to come from. But we all know that this isn't how it should be.

But Jesus is talking here about our relationship to our *heavenly Father*. He's the perfect father: he's never going to forget the things we need; he's never going to abandon us; he's never going to drink or gamble away the means of providing for us.

So when we worry, *what shall we eat? or what shall we drink? or what shall we wear?*' (v 31), God feels very sad. Experience tells us that he'll provide all that we need, in abundance. *Look at the birds . . . see how the lilies of the field grow* (vv 26,28), look at all the good things which God's poured out on you throughout your life!

When we reflect on the abundance which God's given us in creation, and on the loving care which God's lavished on us all our lives, it's not surprising that comments on this passage include the following: 'Worry is not a little weakness we all give way to from time to time. It is a sin that is strictly forbidden.'¹ 'Worry is practical atheism and an affront to God.'²

DON'T WORRY – PUT GOD FIRST

We're not to be concerned about our own needs, but *seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness*, Jesus tells us in v 33.

In other words, Jesus isn't just telling us what *not* to do; he's telling us what we *should* do. We're called to put God first in our lives; even our own essential needs should come lower on our list of concerns than *[God's] kingdom and his righteousness*.

Tom Wright points out that when Jesus urged his followers to put God first in their lives, 'it's important to realise which God he's talking about.'¹³ Our *heavenly Father* isn't a distant dictator, who doesn't care about food, or drink, or clothes, or life, or beauty. He's the God who takes care of the birds, the God who lavishes beautiful clothing on wild flowers, the God who created this amazing world and filled it with wonder and mystery and beauty and energy and excitement – *everything* we need for life in all its fullness. Jesus is talking about the God who just wants us to enjoy all the good things he's provided for us, the God who just wants us to trust him, to love him, and to receive all the good things he longs to give us.

It's also important to realise what Jesus *isn't* saying. He isn't saying that what we eat, what we drink and what we wear aren't important. Of course they are! Our *heavenly Father knows that [we] need* all these things (v 32), and he's promised to provide them for us (v 33). Our needs for food, drink and clothes are important, but we're not to worry about them.

Neither is Jesus saying that we shouldn't enjoy delicious food, fine wines and beautiful clothes. There was nothing Jesus liked better than a party! And when he died, the soldiers thought his tunic was so

special that they threw dice for it rather than tear it up. God wants us to enjoy what we eat, what we drink and what we wear, but we're not to worry about them.

And neither is Jesus saying, 'Don't work'. The birds of the air may not *sow or reap or store away in barns*, but they do spend most of their waking life searching for food. The point is that God has provided food for them to find. We still need to plant the seeds which God provides; we still need to gather harvests which have grown by God's blessing; we still need to spin and weave wool and cotton, which God has provided, to make our clothes. We need to work to transform the raw materials, which God provides, into food, drink and clothes; but we're not to worry about them.

God knows that we need all these things. What he's saying is, 'Leave all that to me, guys – worrying about it won't do any good, it will only distract you, and your focus needs to be fully and completely on me.'

YES, BUT . . .

This is all very well, but God doesn't always provide all we need, does he? "DON'T WORRY IF YOU ARE STARVING? There has hardly been any rain at all for months and the harvest has failed. Tens of thousands do not have enough to eat and the death toll from starvation, which includes many Christian believers, is rising steadily. Much-needed money from sympathetic governments and food from the relief agencies are on their way but, for an increasing number, it will be too little too late. It is a not uncommon and tragic situation in the struggling

and suffering world." This was the headline and first paragraph of a newspaper article published a few years ago.⁴

Putting our trust in the Lord doesn't guarantee us an easy ride. This wonderful world which God has created and given to us is spoilt by sin and suffering. The bottom line is that the only security we have is our relationship with our loving heavenly Father. There's nothing else we can rely on. When Jesus suffered, he didn't stop loving and trusting his heavenly Father. Jesus knew that his Father wouldn't allow anything to happen to him which wasn't ultimately for good. We don't understand why God allows some of his people to go without the basic necessities of life. Even so, it's still true that the Lord knows their needs, and is deeply and intimately concerned with every aspect of their lives. And it's still true that worrying about their situation won't help them.

We can be fairly certain that when Jesus preached this sermon, there was no-one there who was in danger of dying from starvation. They lived in a land 'flowing with milk and honey' (Exodus 3:8). They lived under OT law, which insisted that farmers bringing in their harvest should leave plenty behind for those who would otherwise be hungry (Leviticus 19:9-10). For those of us who do have plenty, putting God first in our lives means doing what we can to alleviate the suffering of people who don't have the basic necessities of life. The author of that newspaper article concludes: 'more than 20,000 people around the world die every day from malnutrition. Now that is something to be worried about when a recent survey shows that the average British family throws away food that is the equivalent of six meals every week.'

CONCLUSION

We can be addicted to worry! The more we have, the more we worry. Some of us are even worried if we've got nothing to worry about! Jesus challenges us to leave the worrying to God, and to *seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness* (v 33). If we do that we'll be much happier, and we'll be able to echo Paul when he writes: *I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.* (Philippians 4:11-13)

¹ Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew*, (IVP, Leicester, 2000), p 104

² R H Mounce, *Matthew*, (New International Biblical Commentary; Paternoster, Carlisle, 1995), p 61

³ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone Part 1*, second edition (London, SPCK, 2004), p 66

⁴ Henry Whyte, 'Don't worry if you are starving?', *Church of England Newspaper*, 17 January 2014, p 10