

Sermon on Sunday 31 July

by Rev. Alan Stewart

(Readings: Psalm 23 & Luke 12. 22-31)

The sea of anxiety

‘Not a speck of light is showing, so the danger must be growing. Are the fires of hell a-glowing, is the grisly reaper mowing?... for the rowers keep on rowing. And they’re certainly not showing, any signs that they are slowing’.

Name that movie.

It is, of course, the sinister tunnel scene from *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, where a wild-eyed Gene Wilder recites these words to a terrified boatful of golden ticket winners and their pushy parents, as their boat plunges through dark tunnels projected with nightmarish scenes.

And, ever since, it’s been the cause of many a poor child’s nightmare, second only to the child catcher from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*!

In her book *Atlas of the Heart*, the researcher Brené Brown uses this particular scene to describe what anxiety feels like; ‘Escalating loss of control, worst-case-scenario thinking... total uncertainty’. We can add to that the very physical symptoms of dry mouth, muscle ache, knots in the stomach, trembling, etc.

To be anxious is to be human. Brené Brown explains that anxiety can be both a trait (‘I’m an anxious person’) and a state (‘I feel anxious about x’). Anxiety can, we know, be a healthy thing. It can protect us from danger, allow us to react quicker in times of emergency. It can, however, take over our lives, resulting in restlessness, fatigue, irritability, inertia, insomnia...

And, usually, we resort to one of two coping mechanisms; we worry or we avoid. Brené Brown again, says that, ‘Worry is... the thinking part of anxiety... a chain of negative thoughts about bad things that might happen in the future’.

Jesus famously advises his listeners not to worry about the very basic things of life like food and clothing. And, considering that most of his listeners would have lived below the breadline, that's a big ask.

He goes on to say, 'Who by worrying can add a single hour to their lives?'. Jesus understood that worry does exactly the opposite; it steals and consumes life. As the character Newt Scamander says in *Fantastic Beasts*, 'Worrying means you suffer twice'.

Worry isn't always rational. Most of the things we worry about will never happen. Likewise, a sizeable proportion of our worry surrounds what's past and therefore can't be changed.

Some worry is inspired by criticism, often unfair, by others who are often acting out of insecurity. A percentage is health related, which ironically worsens with worry. And then there's that small remainder which is legitimate, because life has its problems.

We're living through particularly anxious times; the shadow of a pandemic, war in Ukraine, soaring costs of living... insert here whatever else you're personally dealing with. It's easy in such times to live in a constant spiral of negative thinking, which if kept to ourselves, spirals deeper. Sometimes it's scary because we don't understand it, or we feel we should be coping better. Brené Brown says that our anxiety needs 'to be understood and respected, perhaps even befriended. We need to pull up a chair with it, understand why it's showing up, and ask ourselves what there is to learn.'

Owning our anxiety, speaking it out, writing it down, sharing it with God can defuse it of its power and bring a new and liberating perspective.

Often our current anxieties are rooted in anxiety from the past. Growing up in a family, for example, where it's unsafe or chaotic or where there's a strong sense of scarcity, will impact how secure we feel in the present.

Those who are uncomfortable with uncertainty are more likely to experience anxiety, and clearly life is and always will be uncertain. Jesus was able to say to his followers, 'Don't worry,' because his security was in something he was certain of; the faithfulness and the goodness of God. He believed that our energies should be

focused on the right thing, what he calls the Kingdom/the world as it should be. He understood that if we reach outside of ourselves to focus on the needs of others, in this new economy, our own needs should be met. And that takes guts because we're hardwired for self-preservation.

Worry saps energy and joy. It shrinks our world. When we choose to focus our energies on something bigger, then our world expands. When we choose not be introspective but to reach out, when we choose to be grateful for what we already have rather than what we lack, when we invest in things that we *can* change, then joy and energy return, and life takes on a new dimension.

In an uncertain world, our only security is the certainty of God's faithfulness and goodness.

Father Richard Rohr says, 'Faith, for Jesus, is the opposite of anxiety. If you are anxious, if you are trying to control everything, if you are worried about many things, you don't have faith, according to Jesus. You do not trust that God is good and on your side. You're trying to do it all yourself, lift yourself up by your own bootstraps.'

Worry is a thief. I've spent countless hours fretting over what has or could or should happen. If only I'd invested those hours more wisely. Alas, hindsight is a wonderful thing.

A few years ago, on a course I was attending, a lady shared her story of a time when her brother was dying and her father was going through a particularly harrowing episode of bipolar.

When she shared this with her spiritual director, he asked her to think of a picture of how she felt, of where her life was at this precise time.

The image that came to her was one of a stormy sea, where she was but a tiny boat upon this ocean, battered by waves on all sides, surviving somehow against the odds. Later, on retreat, the lady was given the familiar Psalm 23 to meditate upon, and one particular phrase spoke to her like it had never spoken before; 'You spread a table before me'.

In that moment, it was as if the camera of her life panned down into the cabin of that little boat and she could see its table spread with charts and maps. And, in that moment, it was as if God was saying, 'Hold on. I'm navigating, I'm in control'.

So, may there be moments in your life and my life when the camera pans down into the cabin of our little boat and we hear and put our faith in those same words; 'Hold on. I'm navigating. I'm in control'.

Calm me, O Lord, as you stilled the storm. Still me, O Lord, keep me from harm. Let all the tumult within me cease. Enfold me, Lord, in your peace.



*Calm me, O Lord,
as you stilled the storm.*