

Reflection on Sunday 8 September 2024

by Adrian Walter, Lay Leader of Worship

Reading: Matthew 6. 24-34

Don't worry – Be happy!

Worry - we don't have to look too hard to find things to worry about around us; come to think of it, we don't have to look too hard to find things to worry about inside us either!

At an international level, earlier this year, the broadcaster John Humphreys published a chilling piece on the YouGov website, entitled, "Another world war – how scared should we be?" In it, he wrote about the Doomsday Clock, which is widely regarded as the most reliable indicator of what stage the world is at on the most perilous journey imaginable - the road to the extinction of the human race.

The clock was created in 1947, in the aftermath of the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, by the International Bulletin of Atomic Scientists in an attempt to show how little time we have left to get atomic/nuclear weapons under control; in other words, **how close mankind is to destroying itself**. The closer to midnight, the closer we are to a global nuclear catastrophe. The furthest from midnight it has ever been was in **1991 when it sat at 23:43**. However, since then it has slowly moved forward and it currently sits at 23:58:30, meaning we are just 90 seconds away from annihilation.

Then, at a national level, **last month** YouGov published a list of the 20 things that most worried the UK population. Surprisingly,

the state of this world failed to get a mention. The **economy** came top, with 52% of people surveyed listing it as a concern (down from 80% a few years ago). **Healthcare** came a close second on 50%, closely followed by **Immigration** on 40%, and then a step down to 24% for **housing** and 20% for the **environment**. At the bottom was a basket of issues including education, crime, pensions, tax, childcare, welfare, all well below 20%.

And at the personal level, we can all come up with our own lists of things we worry about... the things we are worried about now and the things we've been worried about during the past week, month, year...

Our children, our grandchildren, our parents, our grandparents, our spouses or partners, our health, our weight, our blood pressure, our vision, the results of that test. How much we spend on food and energy. How much sleep we get. Will I get promoted or will I lose my job? How long could we survive on unemployment benefit? Will my pension be there when I need it?

And then, as Christians, we find ourselves worrying about the church. Our financial shortfall, our lack of growth, our ageing buildings, our ageing population, our responsibilities as leaders, PCC members, youth workers or volunteers.

Today's passage begins with Jesus issuing a stark warning: As a modern translation puts it, *"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money"*. The King James Version uses the word "Mammon" instead of money. It's an Aramaic word, and Jesus' native tongue, and it carries a very negative connotation. "Filthy

lucre" could be one way of translating it, and in some contexts it could even be used as a personification which emphasises the point Jesus is making – there are two gods, the true living God and a false, material god.

So, having set the context, Jesus moves on to the point of this discourse: worry – and, in particular, worrying about basic human needs: food, clothing, health – well, that's three of YouGov's top five, so not much has changed!

However, we need to remember who Jesus is talking to here. Primarily, He's talking to His disciples. Remember, these are the ones who have just left their nets, boats, work and families to follow him; in fact, later in Matthew's gospel, Peter blurts out, "We have left everything to follow you...". However, Jesus is fully aware that the crowd is also listening, so He is talking to them, too, and the crowd was made up of, for the most part, the poor.

You see, the ancient world was very much like our world today in that the disparity between the rich and poor was huge, and an ever-widening chasm. So, this means that Jesus' audience had almost the same makeup as any church congregation today; a small group of committed followers and a large number of people that haven't committed but are interested enough to hang around to hear more.

This is Jesus' audience. These are the people to whom Jesus is saying, *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not*

much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"

At first sight, this is an incredibly hard saying. It almost feels as if Jesus is using the language that Bobby McFerrin used in his 1988 song, "Don't worry, be happy", to society's most vulnerable and marginalised, to those on the far side of that chasm. It almost sounds as if He is being dismissive about the real and perilous position that the majority of His audience are in.

But, for those who could hear it, in the middle of this message, and very easy to miss, is the love God has for each person. Listen again, "Are you not much more valuable than they?"; a rhetorical question to which the answer must be a resounding "Yes".

You see, Jesus' audience lived in a perpetual state of worry – they were surrounded by messages reinforcing the point that they were worthless, less than nothing, inconsequential and expendable. The occupying Roman Empire taxed them on what little they had. It also had the power to make them slaves or to execute them for minor offences. The religious leaders had developed an organised religion so that people lived in a continual state of fear about whether they were ritually pure, whether they were good enough, clean enough, human enough to even enter the temple or synagogue, let alone approach God. So, Jesus' message was one of hope for them; God is not heedless to your situation, "**...your heavenly Father knows that you need them**", and, by implication, and even more radically, *in the eyes of God, you have value*. No wonder that Jesus amassed a huge following during His ministry.

Jesus ends by encouraging them to, " **...seek first His kingdom and His righteousness... all these things will be given to you as well.**" Does this mean that God will supply endless amounts of food, clothing or cash? Does it mean that all our problems are over? No, it certainly does not! But it does mean that we can meet our worries and anxieties head on with the quiet confidence that we won't have to face them alone.

So we come full circle as we return to the first words of Jesus in this passage: "**No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and money.**"

Given that Jesus defined serving money as anxiety about earthly things, we could, quite legitimately in my view, rephrase the latter part of verse 24 as, "You cannot serve both God and **worry.**" We need to understand that God's love stands with us, even when we believe we are alone in the dark. We need to understand that God's love has been there before, has been through the darkness of suffering and fear. We need to understand that He perfectly understands what we are going through and, finally, we need to understand that His love doesn't necessarily mean rescue, but also the strength to face what lies before us.

You see, God never promised to keep us **out** of times of trouble, He only promised to keep us **in** times of trouble – and, if you remember nothing else of what I've said, remember that!

I'd like to finish by praying an excerpt from a prayer by the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, which has meant a lot to me over the past 14 years. Perhaps you can pray this with me:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain

where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. And I know that if I do this, You will lead me by the right road although I may know nothing about it.

Therefore, I will trust You always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for You are ever with me, and will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Amen