

Communion

Anxiety

Isaiah 49:13-16; Matthew 6:25-34

A commentator notes: "Stress, anxiety and worry form a trinity of words very familiar in today's culture. Pills, potions and techniques to help relaxation or gain peace of mind flood the marketplace. The irony is that our anxiety epidemic has broken out in a society where, generally speaking, we have more financial security, have better health and live longer lives than those of any previous generation. It seems to be true that having more is far from a recipe to cure our anxieties. The days when people left their front doors unlocked, where children could roam fields and seashores without any particular worries, when most people had little in the way of material goods, seem a long way off. It's the upwardly mobile today who live in gated communities and drive around in cars built like tanks."ⁱ

When Jesus spoke His words about not worrying, He was speaking to poor people who have very little and whose real anxiety could well have been about where their next meal was coming from. Worry is not confined to either rich or poor, it is universal, even if for different reasons.

Even a cursory scan of the headlines reveals a country, a world, riven with anxiety. And sometimes with good cause. The tragedy of the death of Henry Nowak, where decent politicians have lamented the loss and asked the serious questions needing asked, whilst inciters of racially motivated hatred from the Reform Party and their supporters, and the technocrat billionaire Elon Musk, give cause for anxiety in communities across the country. Kudos to the people of Southampton who have spurned the bussed-in disturbers of the peace in a community that needs

time and healing and peace and not the fomented “ice cold anger” that the most irresponsible of politicians called for, and we saw a few nights ago in baying crowds.

In world made anxious by an casually aimless brutality in Iran and Lebanon, with no exit-strategy clear from its perpetrators, and the cruel ongoing bombardment of Ukraine, and the knock-on effect on the global economy. All of this, and more gives great cause for anxiety.

Anxiety has no boundaries: where the next meal will come from, if a cure can be found, where a graduate will find a job. Anxiety lives in the homes of the poor and the wealthy, the young and the old. Anxiety about whether our business will work out. Anxiety is a part of the lives of people of every race and in all parts of our community and world. Men and women are anxious. Married people and those on their own are anxious. Anxiety is a part of distracted days and sleepless nights. Anxiety takes on the past and the future.

When Jesus comes to these sayings, He is preaching to everyone. “...*do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink,’ or ‘What shall we wear?’*” Jesus is direct, but His words are intended to offer freedom and release. Is He inviting people into a living in a new way, or is their criticism about the way we live? Of course, it is both, but gently.

Here is a Man Who has looked, and has listened, and cares. Here is a Man Who is not telling us to give up or to give in, but to face whatever makes us anxious, and to look beyond it. For help. For encouragement. For hope. Here is a Man Who we believe carries the weight of the world on His shoulders, but takes the time to slow down and to get alongside us, and to help us carry whatever it is that is weighing us down. The anxiety. The worry. The fear. The resentment. The pain. The loss.

What Jesus offers is not some platitude but, as is always pastorally helpful when anxiety in whatever form strikes, asks those who hear Him to refocus. Look at a bigger picture; look at a

different picture. That non-threatening imagery of noticing the birds and the wild flowers takes the anxious person, if they are willing to go, out of themselves and into a world bigger than their tight picture frame of worry. Jesus is not offering a philosophy, nor even a moral law. It is a gospel invitation, an invitation to lift up your heads and your eyes, an invitation to breathe a little more gently, and invitation to slow down as you look and as you listen to what is going on around you, and not just what is going on inside you.

When we toss and turn at night, anxious about this one, or that thing; when our minds are going a hundred miles to the dozen; when we give in to over-thinking and over-planning, or under-thinking and under-planning; Jesus says not only, 'Do not be anxious', but even just for a moment, wonder about this. Look at the birds, consider the lilies. The birds soar and sing. The lilies in their beauty surpass even the most glorious of Old Testament kings, Solomon who represented the height of human wealth, beauty and achievement, who grasped glory for himself.

The birds and the lilies neither do things nor grasp, they simply are, and they are provided for. Not that there isn't birdsong and wing-flight; not that there isn't growth from bulb to leaf to flower. But that in God's held world, there is a sense of place, and accompaniment, and provision. Might it be, Jesus suggest, when we stop our fretting for a moment, and breathe in and out, we might find the stability of God's love in nature around us, in relationships that support us, in art or music that inspire us, in preparing meals that nourish us.

For all sorts of reasons and in all sorts of ways these last months have been challenging for all of us. When I find I the anxiety levels mount, this is what I do. I find myself at different times going out for a walk along the Braidburn Valley. There is something in the movement of the Braid burn, in that cathedral of trees in Winter, Spring, and Summer, in leaf or not. In the smell of the earth. In the passing by of strangers of walking alone. Something in all of that which, though not

resolving anything, allows me, and I know many others, those breathing spaces away from screens and emails, phone-calls and reports, concerning situations and overwhelming news about the brokenness of our country and our world.

"Do not be anxious..." Look at the birds, consider the lilies, listen to the running stream, sense the moving trees. See the big skies. Know that God is still God. That Jesus accompanies quietly until we notice. That the Spirit rustles through our over-wrought brains and says, "Do not be anxious..." Calm. Breathe. Look. Listen.

Now, today's troubles are many, and don't for a moment think Jesus is being unrealistic or superficial. While Jesus tells us to look, wonder, and forget our cares even for a moment in the contemplation of birds and flowers, in the words of the 1970s pop song, Jesus, 'never promised you a rose garden.' Jesus knows life in the world is tough. In His world few had enough to eat or enough money to get by on. As we read about the people Jesus met in every walk of life the emotional signs of anxiety and worry and fear were ever present. Life was, and is, uncertain and tenuous. But Jesus still speaks, and offers the promise of God's provision that help will come, that things don't stay the same for ever, that hope filters in, and that light never goes out. This is what the people of faith are called not only to believe, but to experience, and to live.

What if we chose to live in that world. What if we live not in a world where we sometimes feel we've been abandoned and left to our own devices, but live in a world not ruled by grabbing and anxiety and insecurity, but in a world where we can see, in birds and lilies, God's gifts given again and again to help us lift up our heads. To look and to see beyond ourselves.

It would be callous to simply tell someone who is in a dire situation not to be anxious, and not to worry. There is plenty to worry about. We're human, it comes naturally to us. Jesus' promise isn't that there will be no trouble. Rather, in churches like this, where there is such kindness and

welcome and generosity, where there is goodness to see and hear and feel in services, in programmes we run, and in the people who call this their spiritual home; here, in this sanctuary, for everyone and anyone, a time to look, a time to hear, a time to put the anxiety aside for a moment. And breathe. And maybe, God will help.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Leith Fisher, "But I say to you..." p91