

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

How to have a worry free life

Presented by Michael Jensen

If there's any one emotional state that is characteristic of our experience of the contemporary world it has to be worry. If we know how to do one thing, it is to be worried.

And there's no shortage of things to be genuinely worried about: we worry about loneliness, about whether we will be able to meet our mortgage repayments, about our health, about our relationships; we worry about our children – and about whether we will be able to keep them safe and how they will turn out. We worry about what people will think of us, and about what will become of us.

Just after the First World War my great-grandfather, who was a bricklayer living in Newtown – he helped to build the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital - caught influenza; and after a short illness, died, leaving my great-grandmother and their six children to fend for themselves. Later in his life, my grandpa, who was ten years old at the time, would recall walking through the family home in bewilderment, and asking his sobbing mother 'what will become of us?' Of course, his mother had no answer.

II

'What will become of us?' It is a question that any of us might ask in uncertain times. It is a question that comes from worry: worry that future is uncertain and insecure. And we ask this question because we like to be in control; and every now and again, our experiences remind us how little in control we really are. Our investments shrink. We are made redundant. A spouse walks out. A terrible diagnosis is given. Things happen to those we love.

Everything is plainly *not* in our control. In fact the very things we need to get by in life hang by threads that are prone to snap. What is to become of us?

Perhaps more than ever before in human history, we live in a society which is aware of its vulnerability, and deeply worried about it. That is to say, on top of the worries that human beings would ordinarily have, our generation seems to worry in particularly intense way. Worry – which may be of course a genuine concern and responsibility – has become a pathology. It has become a community health problem on a large scale. We have heart conditions and high blood pressure, we abuse recreational and prescription drugs, we have developed anxiety disorders and panic attacks.

Sales of chewing gum... ?

A whole industry is dedicated to helping us manage our worries: it's called insurance. And listen how some insurance companies try to win us over: *Ready for tomorrow? Make sense of it with Norwich Union.* Or, this one: *Take away the risk, and you can do anything.* Or perhaps most directly: *You can rely on us.* When the world is uncertain and risky and unmanageable and full of worries, we can buy some protection - in financial terms, at least.

So: what are *you* worried about? What keeps you awake? What induces that churning in your stomach? In what lies your greatest insecurity?

And: what are you gonna do with your worry? How are we going to live with the worries we have? Or, how do you now live with your worries?

Well, here's something Jesus said: 'Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?' Don't worry, in other words, about what you need to survive; and don't worry about being accepted by others.

But wait a minute: Is this just a saying that we can just switch the worry button off just by choosing to?

III

Jesus said: 'Don't worry about your life'. But is this just denying reality? or learned optimism? A determination to smile come what may?

Certainly some people think that is the best way to confront our worries in life. It's the ostrich method. Should we just deny the reality of how worrisome things are, and whistle a happy tune; sing a song and do breathing exercises in the hope that our worries will just blow over our heads? I mean, as Jesus himself says, you can't add an hour to your life by worrying about it, can you? In fact, given the health effects of worry, you will probably shorten your life by worrying too much. So: just get on and enjoy life; forget about how insecure things are; we can worry about those things when we get there.

This was of course the philosophy of the famous song 'Don't Worry Be Happy', a hit in 1988 for Bobby McFerrin. Now, for years the rumour circulated that he had failed to heed his own advice and committed suicide in 1992. I believed this myself until quite recently: but, according to Wikipedia at least, McFerrin is very much alive and well. If it is any consolation, Felix Powell, the man who wrote the WWI classic 'Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile' did shoot himself, in 1943.

McFerrin was inspired by the teachings of an Indian mystic and guru Meher Baba, who used to end all his letters with 'Don't Worry, Be Happy'. Of course the problem with the 'don't worry, be happy' method is that it refuses to accept the truth: that the life we live is precariously balanced and out of our control. That there is plenty we *ought* to be worried about. To deny this is to lie to ourselves and to those around us.

But what Jesus is saying is not that we ought to put our heads in sand and deny reality. It is the opposite: he wants us to accept the deeper reality. And the deeper reality is this:

that everything we worry about is the hands of a loving God.

We are valuable to God, says Jesus. Take a look at the birds of the air; think about the lilies of the field. What catering arrangements do they put in place? What stylists do they consult, what tailors do they employ? Do they cook like Jamie Oliver? Do they have Trinny and Susannah to tell them what not to wear? Yet: how well they are fed! How beautifully they are dressed! Are you not much more valuable to your maker than they? And so: will he not bless you far more than they?

What's more he knows that you need food and drink, and things to wear. He knows how we worry about the future, whether we will survive and have enough, and whether we will find acceptance with others. He knows – even when we don't let other know.

IV

God knows what you need, and you are precious to him. So, says Jesus, our obsession with securing these things for ourselves, to screen ourselves from our worries – as if we could - is barking up the wrong tree. We don't live, it turns out, in a chance universe, where we just have to hope that our luck holds out. We live in a world which is governed by the heavenly Father, the one who counts human beings as valuable, and who knows what we need.

And so, knowing this deeper reality, what we ought to worry about most, what Jesus says we really ought to focus on is God's kingdom, and his righteousness.

Since God knows us and holds us precious, and since he knows what worries us, we can leave worrying about those things to him; and what instead ought to grab us is his kingdom and his righteousness.

What we should long for, in the teeth of all that worries us most, is that **God's kingdom should come, and his righteous will be done**. This is not advice to ignore your troubles, or to deny that they are there and to learn to be just be happy: it is instead a call for us to see that the rule of God is established on the earth and his justice done. That's what ought to concern us more than anything.

It's longing for the world to be as God sees it, isn't it? Getting with God's programme is the best insurance we could ever take out, because the world is not governed by chance after all: it is governed by its great creator. And so, says Jesus, pursuing what God wants is always going to be a successful strategy.

But there's a sting in the tale here. Because if we long for God's rule and God's righteousness, for thing to be as God wants them to be, then we will find that **that includes us too**. You can't long for God's kingdom without recognising that you haven't acknowledged God's rule in your own life. You can't long of God's righteousness with any integrity without recognising that God's righteousness has not that often been a feature of your own story. You can't stare for long into the character of God, you can't consider for a minute what God wants in this world, without realising that you yourself have more often been part of the problem than the solution. It is all very well to cry out for justice and peace and righteousness: but are you yourself a reflection of those things? Can you long for them without hypocrisy? If you are seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness, are you not pursuing something that is a guarantee only of your own destruction? Isn't that something to be *really* worried about?

V

What will become of us, then? And how does this fit with the caring Father that Jesus is speaking about? And how can his words be a true antidote for our worries?

Jesus knows that God's kingdom and righteousness have to do with do with **mercy** – a mercy that God will bring about through the death of Jesus on the cross. In that death, when Jesus paid the price for our sin, God brought about his righteousness AND made it something that we could hope for without fearing that we would be destroyed by it. He made it something we could rest in.

God will indeed clean up the world according to his righteous character – of that we can be sure. But we can also know, because of the man on a cross, that God has made it possible for us to survive his clean-up. On that man, the Son of God, our sins were placed. And so, when Jesus says 'Don't worry', he can say so

because he knows that, in his very own life and death, God has provided a saviour for us in our desperate condition before him.

This then is the sweet juicy kernel at the centre of the Christian message. When we look to God's righteousness, we know we can find the mercy that we truly need and the security that we so badly want. And that really is very good news – news that can take your worries away.