

Geoff Howard - 23 February 2014

When preparing a sermon I am sometimes filled with dismay by the text I must expound. For example there are some I can't make head nor tale of. I consult every commentary I can lay my hands on, only to realise that the commentators are as puzzled as myself and their attempts to explain the text merely explain it away. Then there are the popular texts which preachers over the years have manhandled so many times they have been rubbed as smooth as glass and whatever I say you will have heard a hundred times before. At the opposite extreme are the great poetic passages of scripture, monumental, they support themselves and don't need me to prop them up, anything I say is like scrawling my name over a great work of art. But most difficult of all are the texts that require me to commend some virtue where I fall abysmally short myself – loving my neighbour as I love myself; forgiving those who injure me; enduring with patience those who irritate me to the point of madness, and so on and so on. When delivering such sermons a little imp perches on my shoulder and whispers in my ear, *Oh Geoffrey, you such a fraud. If you go on like this much longer you will have them thinking you're a saint, and we both know you aren't.* Such is today's gospel which requires me, who am prone to worry, to instruct you not to worry.

Jesus tells us not to worry not once but five times – don't worry about food, drink, your body, clothes, most of all don't worry about tomorrow. I only wish he'd added, *Don't worry about what you are going to say to the folk at St James on the 2nd Sunday before Lent.*

Where do I start?

Perhaps by first considering what Jesus is **not** referring to.

He is not referring to that most awful of afflictions clinical depression. To tell someone lost in that hellish darkness of despair, isolation and anguish not to worry is both futile and cruel. Jesus would be the last person to tell such sufferers to pull themselves together and look on the bright side.

Neither is he telling us to be unconcerned. He himself was full of concern - for the poor, the sick, the marginalised; he was concerned about injustice and oppression. He tells us not to worry about tomorrow yet he himself in the Garden of Gethsemane was concerned about the approaching day, and who wouldn't be knowing what horrors that tomorrow was to hold? It is legitimate to be concerned about yourself, your children, your friends, your neighbours, the world.

The word Jesus used was *merimnan*, which means to worry anxiously. On a scrap of papyrus, part of an ancient letter, a wife writing to her husband says, *I cannot sleep at night or by day because of the worry – merimnan – I have about your welfare.* Jesus is not advocating a reckless, thoughtless attitude to life; he is forbidding a care-worn, worried fear, which takes away all joy and keeps you awake at night.

As one prone to worry I have three suggestions that may help you to follow our Lord's command. Trust others. Find someone in whom you can confide. Perhaps a priest, perhaps not. But an important part of our ministry is to listen, to allow people to unburden themselves to us; not to give advice, not to condemn, never to be shocked, or think something too trivial for our attention. Just to listen. An elderly lady asked if she could tell me of a worry she'd been carrying around for over sixty years. I expected some lurid story of youthful indiscretion, in fact it was something most of us would have shrugged off and forgotten in a few moments. I listened, gave her absolution and the next time I saw her she said, *I'm fine now.* If only she had spoken to someone sixty years before what anguish she would have been spared. Find someone with whom to share your anxieties.

Trust yourself. Especially if you worry about tomorrow. So often, when it comes to the crunch, when what we fear actually occurs, the human spirit proves equal to the task.

Joe was a Benedictine monk. Thousands of troubled people beat a path to the abbey where he lived for over seventy years. His obituary in *The Tablet* described him as the father confessor to the Roman Catholic church in England. Rowan Williams once told me of the debt he owed to him. His biography, *Father Joe*, went into the top ten of the American book charts, it was written by Tony Hendra, the originator of that outrageous TV show, *Spitting Image*, who was another confider in Joe.

Joe helped me at a difficult time of my life and I became one of his many friends. He once said to me, *Geoffrey, I'm afraid of dying. I'm not afraid of death, but I'm afraid of dying.* Joe suffered from severe asthma so there were good grounds for his fear. A year or so afterwards he was diagnosed with incurable cancer and I went to visit him. Bewilderingly he was even more bubbly than usual. Like a child who has been given a special treat. *It's wonderful, wonderful,* he exclaimed, *I'm no longer afraid of dying.* Joe, like so many others, religious and irreligious, had discovered that when his greatest fear materialised he had the resources to overcome it.

Finally, trust God. Jesus said our heavenly Father knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows the number of the hairs on our head.

Butterflies and Moths on the Brain is a small booklet of meditations. I only met its author, Daphne, once and then only briefly, but she left a lasting impression. Daphne came from a privileged background. Her grandfather's godmother was Queen Victoria, you don't get much more privileged than that. I don't suppose Daphne had ever had to worry about what she should eat or drink or wear. Her life had been protected against many of the worries that afflict most people, except that her young husband died in a pot-holing accident leaving her with two infant children, and then she developed multiple sclerosis. I met her at the smart wedding I was taking of one of her nephews, and I remember an emaciated woman, still fiercely independent, clawing her way up the aisle, grasping at the pews like a drowning man clutching at a plank. Daphne's sister who was my churchwarden said that when Daphne first knew she had MS, in despair she went to a healing service at Oban Cathedral where she was anointed with oil and prayed over. She wasn't cured yet from that moment she was possessed by an abiding peace which enabled her to continue living life with hope and joy. In one of meditations she wrote:

Why should I worry about anything?

Life will progress

whatever I do

or don't do

and my worrying won't help anyone

so what's the point?

I want to tell folk everywhere

how wonderful life is

for me.

I wish they would understand

not worry about their own problems

or mine

wonder if they want

why I'm so happy

I'll tell them if they ask

and wish for the same happiness for them.

My fellow worriers, trust others, trust yourself, trust God.