

Sermon by Geoffrey Howard, 2nd Sunday before Lent 19th February 2017

Matthew 6: 25 - 34

If today was the first Sunday of the year I would open my sermon with, *Thank God 2016 is over*, and then add, *but it isn't, 2016 has spilled over into 2017*. Rarely have I begun a year with such despondency. In my imaginary sermon I would speak of sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind. 2016 has left us with an unknown and worrying future. However the good news is that it is not the first Sunday of the year, it is the 2nd Sunday before Lent, a day on which our Lord enjoins us not to worry. A tall order for how do we escape worrying about tomorrow when the clouds on the horizon foreshadow such ominous weather? And for me there is the additional problem of, *How dare I, something of a worrier myself, presume to preach on such a topic?* But maybe it's because I know what it is to worry that I am well qualified to speak.

However, we need to clarify what our Lord was talking about. The thought behind his words is, *Do not be full of care*. As one commentator writes, *Jesus is not advocating a shiftless, reckless, thoughtless, improvident attitude to life*. It is not advice to pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile whilst heading for death or mutilation in the trenches. What Jesus is warning against is a care-worn, nagging fear, which deprives life of its joy. Jesus in fact approved of making preparations for tomorrow: someone intending to build a tower or a king bent on going to war, he said, should consider carefully the resources he has for such future enterprises; wise shepherds and sailors examine the sky carefully to see what weather the coming day will bring; in Gethsemane he was so concerned about the morrow that he sweated blood. Needless worry and concerned foresight are not the same. Worry paralyses, wise foresight activates; worry is a cul-de-sac, wise anticipation helps us prepare for whatever the future holds.

You will be familiar with the chorus : *Count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done*. It can sound rather slick, superficial and naively optimistic, yet, when I'm feeling too dry to pray, simply reminding myself of my blessings is a proven way to prime the pump. How blessed I am compared to a homeless refugee. How rich even the neediest among us is compared to the misery of the homeless and vulnerable. Think of the dashed hopes of those children to whom we solemnly promised a refuge and whom now we have heartlessly abandoned not to say betrayed. If we were in their shoes we well might have something to worry about this morning. Let's count our blessings.

And instead of worrying about the future, let's ponder a little on the past. Think of that phrase in Newman's great hymn, *So long thy power hath blessed me, sure it still will lead me on*. It is the deliverances of yesterday that kindle hopes for tomorrow. I speak from experience, my own life has not been free from times of despair. Recently at a supper party I sat next to an anthropologist and, as anthropologists will, she said, Tell me about yourself. Somewhat reluctantly, for the others, each connected to a Cambridge College, were also listening. I said something like this: Because of my dysfunctional family my formal education expired at the very moment it should have taken off, in Year One of Grammar school I was in the top stream, in Year Two I was the bottom of the bottom stream; because of persistent truancy I was transferred to a sink school where most of the teachers were incompetent and some terrifyingly brutal; at 13 I made the most of a minor illness to avoid returning to school, my formal education finished prematurely with nothing to show but a passion for reading; at 14 I began working in a factory, which was like a daily imprisonment. On the day I was 21 I left home penniless to make my own way in life, eventually becoming a manager with an international pharmaceutical company; taking an external degree in law; being called to the bar and admitted to membership of Lincoln's Inn; and finally finding my true vocation as a parish priest. My inquisitor exclaimed, *Remarkable!* Which I suppose it is. All the more remarkable in that it was a dramatic conversion at 17 which changed the direction of my life in more ways than one. Who would have thought that a neglected, ineducable drop-out would ever find himself at home in such company? Yet I am by no means unique, in most lives there have been times of black despair, injustice, overwhelming sorrow and the death of hope, yet most have found the strength to struggle through and discover life still has meaning, hope and joy. Is not this an antidote for worry?

It may sound trite to say that a worry shared is a worry halved, but it is substantially true. Once when visiting a widower to arrange his late wife's funeral he asked if he might tell me something he had never told anyone else and which had worried him for over 60 years. He had once been a witness in a Court Martial and to protect a fellow squaddie had lied on oath. Many would have dismissed this as trivial, after all it happens in court every day. But he was a man of integrity and it had clouded his life for decades. I listened to his confession, gave him absolution and his relief was visible, like the fading away of a black cloud. Every priest must have a similar story to tell. Anyone with a nagging worry clouding their life needs to share it with someone – a priest, a friend,

a counselor.

Prayer is sharing your worries with God. But sometimes one is so obsessed with worry it is impossible to pray. As an insurance against such times it is a good idea to memorise a simple prayer or two. I was once approached by a parishioner, a troubled young man with a history of mental instability and drug use, at night in bed, wrapped in darkness, he was assailed by the demon creations of his troubled mind and finished up in a state of terror. He came to me for help. I introduced him to the 3rd Collect at Evening Prayer, which I myself often use: *Lighten our darkness we beseech thee, O Lord, and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; for the love of thine only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.* He found this genuinely helpful, it gave him another, more creative point, on which to focus his thoughts and it dissipated his terrors. Memorise a few prayers, especially a few psalms, these calmly recited in the depths of the night when the demons of worry gather round can bring great serenity.

Finally, there are the promises of Holy Scripture. When I say this I'm not speaking as a fundamentalist, I question the promises in the Bible as much as any other part and some promises seem extravagantly unreal, but it is wise to remind oneself that the Biblical promises were not born in a vacuum, they are the products of human experience as well as divine inspiration. Judea was a tiny country sandwiched between two empires - like Poland between Russia and Germany - it was constantly trampled over by brutal, warring armies. This is the context for many of the promises of the Old Testament, they were forged in the furnace of affliction. Over the last few months, when I've been so despondent at the state of the world, verses from Psalm 46 have kindled some confidence in the future: *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof.* These are not the words of someone whistling in the dark, they are those of someone whose world has fallen about his ears and who has come through it in one piece. Which also illustrates that it is from the experience of others that we ourselves may gain strength. At a mid-life crisis when my life fell apart TS Elliot's *Four Quartets* helped me to put the pieces together again, it seemed to me it was the work of someone who had entered great darkness and come out on the other side, it was what I needed. For Christians there is no better example than our Lord himself: *Consider him*, says the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews – *Consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.*

By counting our blessings, pondering on our past, sharing our problems, grasping God's promises and taking heart from the experience of others, the sterility of worry may be transformed into the fruitfulness of hope - even after 2016.