

# **The goodness of God – and how not to worry**

**by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> February 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Psalm 104 (abridged); Matthew 6:24<sup>1</sup>-34

Year A, Proper 2

## **Introduction: the Parable of Mr Worry**

Mr Worry is a story for children by Roger Hargreaves<sup>2</sup>. Mr Worry worries about everything. If it rains, he worries that his roof is going to leak. And if it doesn't rain, he worries that all the plants in his garden will die. When he goes shopping, he worries that he is spending too much money, and when he gets home, he worries that he's left something behind, and then he worries about where he's going to put it all. Life is one long worry for Mr Worry.

Life seems to look up when he meets a wizard, who offers a solution: Mr Worry is to go home and write down everything he's worried about, and the wizard will then make sure that none of it actually happens. After giving the wizard his list, Mr Worry doesn't have a care in the world – at least for the first week. But then he goes to see the wizard again. This time he's worried because – he hasn't got anything to worry about!

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<sup>1</sup> The lectionary reading starts at verse 25

<sup>2</sup> *Mr Worry*, text and illustrations by Roger Hargreaves (London, Egmont Books Ltd)

I don't think Roger Hargreaves intended this story as a parable, but I do think there are one or two points of connection with the teaching of Jesus. First of all, the story illustrates the futility of constantly worrying. Jesus says that it doesn't do us any good – it won't make us any taller or make us live any longer. In fact, we now know that the stress of worrying actually shortens people's lives.

Secondly, just as the wizard takes away Mr Worry's reason for worrying, so also, according to Jesus, if we remember that God loves us and provides for us we can focus on him and living for his Kingdom instead of focussing on all our own real or imagined problems. Mr Worry manages to do without his worries for a week, but then realises he needs something to worry about. How about us? Can we shift our focus from ourselves and our concerns onto God, so that we put his Kingdom and his righteousness first?

### **Nothing to worry about?**

There are several ways in which we could misunderstand Jesus' teaching in this passage. When he says that God feeds the birds and clothes the grass, is he saying that we don't need to bother to make provision for ourselves and our families? That somehow all we need will just come to us? Or that God will make sure nothing bad will ever happen to us, so long as we trust him?

It's important to look further afield in the scriptures to help us understand the meaning of one particular passage. Jesus showed us by his example that it is right to work to earn a living – he was himself a carpenter for more years than he

was a preacher<sup>3</sup>. St Paul also gave an example of providing for his own needs and those of his companions by working as a tentmaker<sup>4</sup>. When Jesus talks about God feeding the birds, that is a poetic way of saying that God has provided through his creation ways for all life to be sustained – berries, worms, insects etc for birds to eat. The world that God has created has enough resources for all the human race to live, but sadly human beings have plundered those resources through greed and thoughtlessness. Climate change is one example of how the pursuit of riches and luxury by people in rich countries has led to natural disasters that affect people in poorer countries.

And Jesus acknowledges that there will be troubles that we all face day by day when he says that “Today’s trouble is enough for today” (v 34).

### **A question of priorities**

The lectionary reading containing this teaching of Jesus starts at verse 25: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life...” That first word, “Therefore”, is a clue that to understand what Jesus is saying we need to see what he said immediately beforehand. [When you see the word “therefore” in the Bible, you need to ask what it is there for?]

In the previous section, from verse 19, Jesus contrasts two ways of thinking. He tells us not to lay up earthly treasures, which will be spoiled by moth, rust and robbery, but to lay

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 6:3

<sup>4</sup> Acts 18:2-3, 20:34-35

up heavenly treasures<sup>5</sup>, in other words, instead of putting our efforts into acquiring material things, we should prioritise good works, things that will make a lasting difference. Then he talks about the way we look at the world – do we have a healthy way of looking at the world or are we spiritually blind<sup>6</sup>? And finally he talks about how you can't serve two masters. We might think that we control our material wealth, but the pursuit of it can easily become your master, and prevent you from wholeheartedly serving God<sup>7</sup>.

So Jesus is challenging us about our priorities: where is our security, what is really important to us? If we trust in material things to give us happiness and security, such as a good salary, a nice house, great holidays, a secure pension etc, then we'll be devoting too much effort and stress to these. These things are not bad in themselves, but they should never become our master. Jesus is not saying we shouldn't plan for our future, or take care of ourselves, but he does challenge us about our attitudes.

If you want to check whether you have a healthy attitude to material things, ask yourself how easy it is for you to give things away, or lend them? When there's a disaster, such as the recent earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, how does the size of your donation compare to the amount you would spend on a meal out, a trip to the theatre, a new outfit, or even a short holiday? Is it less or more?

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 6:19-21

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 6:22-23

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 6:24

Ask yourself, would I be willing to lend my car to a friend who needs it for a week, even if that means making other arrangements for me to get around? Would I be willing to lend a neighbour an expensive tool, a sewing machine or piece of garden equipment?

Time is one of our most valuable commodities. How much time would I be willing to spend listening to a friend or neighbour who is going through a hard time and needs support, even if it means I don't get done some of the things I had planned to do with my free time?

### **The goodness of God**

I think the reason we often get our priorities wrong is that we don't spend enough time contemplating the goodness of God. Today's Bible passage isn't just about not worrying. It's about appreciating the goodness of God. Jesus tells us to consider the birds of the air, and how God provides for them, and to notice the beauty of the wild flowers. How often do we take the trouble to just be aware of all that is good around us in nature – the trees, birds, animals, rivers, sunsets, the frozen dew on a spider's web? Or to watch nature programmes on the television, like those of David Attenborough, which reveal some of the wonders of nature that we don't have the opportunity to see first-hand? Psalm 104, which we heard earlier, celebrates God's creativity, provision and wisdom in the way the world is made. Do we make worshipping God a priority? An hour or so in church once a week is not much, but if we come to it with an attitude of love and gratitude it could do a lot for our sense of wonder at what God has done for us and his love for us,

shown in creation, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and in our own experience of life.

This God, says Jesus, is our loving heavenly Father. We are precious to him, much more than the birds or the wild flowers. If it's really true that this God, who made the universe, loves us as much as Jesus says, shouldn't we put his kingdom and his righteousness first in everything we think, say and do? The way of the world is to make sure our material needs and desires are supplied first, and then whatever time, money and energy we have left we may think about giving to God and those in need. The way of Jesus is to love God first of all with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. When we decide to make that a reality every day, other priorities will fall into place. We will be set free from an obsession with our needs and wants.

Jesus tells us that God knows our needs and will provide because he loves us. The antidote to worry is to reflect on the love of God and to try to see our problems from this perspective. So Peter wrote in his first letter, "Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you".<sup>8</sup> And Paul wrote:

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 1 Peter 5:7

<sup>9</sup> Philippians 4:6-7 NRSV

Knowing the love of God for ourselves, and loving him with all that we are – this is what it means to live the way God intended, walking day by day with our Creator and heavenly Father.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,  
Forgive our foolish ways;  
Reclothe us in our rightful mind;  
In purer lives thy service find,  
In deeper reverence, praise.

Drop thy still dews of quietness,  
Till all our strivings cease;  
Take from our souls the strain and stress,  
And let our ordered lives confess  
The beauty of thy peace.

*John G. Whittier*