

22nd March 2020 10 am. Andrew Attwood: “Do Not Worry” (Matthew 6:25-34)

[Revd. Andrew Attwood:]

Once again you might need to turn to your Bibles, Matthew chapter 6, verses 25 to 34. Lindsey is now going to read that to us

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This is the Word of the Lord.

[Revd. Andrew Attwood:]

Thank you, Lindsey.

That's one person I don't have to do any social distancing from, thank goodness. This is a weird time for us all to be in, we have to recognise that, and so it seems very appropriate to explore the question of anxiety and worry, because that's affecting a huge number of people in our nation and in the world. Now we know that uncertainty is part of the human condition. This country is pretty expert at that now. We have had kind of three years of being anxious and uncertain over Brexit and now this has been a bit of a double-whammy really. Now one of the things I'm observing is the reaction of the ordinary human to disruption, to things that cause alarm: if it's a baby, they cry. If it's an adult, they appear to panic-buy toilet rolls! It's one of those things that's just been astounding and a little disturbing. People queue around the block to get the latest pack of toilet rolls and everyone is starting to count how many they've got. It's a bit weird. I would also wonder that even the more mature among us would admit that this is a stressy time, because there is so much change. I wonder how many of you are tired? Are running on adrenaline and weary? I think I've been a bit more short-tempered over these last few days, and I didn't sleep very well last night, which is an indicator, even though I'm trying to keep on with the exercising, and I read before bed, and particularly yesterday I tried to make an effort at being a bit more still with God. So you know, this is an everybody thing. With the passage that Lindsey just read, we know that Jesus speaks directly into our anxieties, in this reading from the Sermon on the Mount, and he's not alone: we know that Peter, the apostle and Paul the apostle do the same: Paul in Philippians 4 says “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” And then there's a promise: “And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in

Christ Jesus." So there's a common concern from Jesus and his principal witnesses to address worry.

But I did want to bring some emphasis today on Jesus, speaking in the Sermon on the Mount and how he speaks in even more precise and even more authoritative ways. Just a little bit of background: you will realise that when Matthew put together the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew [chapters] 5 to 7 he was collating probably a number of famous teachings that Jesus had regularly said throughout the whole of the three-year ministry, and he's doing it as a classic comparison with Moses going up the mountain to collect the Ten Commandments and the oracles of God. It's a kind of a parallel Matthew is setting up: so Jesus is like Moses in the same way that Moses went to go and hear from God and come down with the commands of God. Jesus goes up the mountain and speaks the oracles of God. You'll find it peppered all the way through the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, "It was said to you, ... but I say to you..." So he supersedes what Moses said with his own direct, clear words.

There's a big difference between good advice, rabbinic direction to disciples and a divine command. There's a difference between good advice, rabbinic direction and divine command.

Now, because of media, because of reporting and newspapers, we are absolutely awash at the minute with good advice. There's lots of people commenting on what to do and what not to do with the coronavirus situation. Every day we have political briefings as to what to do, what's changing, what circumstances are shifting for employment, for money, for health provision, for wise behaviour at this time. We have to recognise, though, that this good advice is provisional: we have some excellent scientists and brilliant medics, and we have some seemingly at the moment very serious and devout politicians, trying their best. But you've got to remember we don't know, humans, ordinary humans, don't know what is coming. We can guess, and we can provisionally estimate what's coming, but we don't know.

When Jesus began his earthly ministry, right at the start they call him rabbi. They called him rabbi, because they had a tradition of rabbis wandering round the disciples and they gave heed to him and those who decided to be his disciples followed him and took notice of what he said, and all of that because they were used to honouring the words of a rabbi. But then Jesus started to say and do things that are different from ordinary rabbis. He started to speak to storms. He started to take bread and fishes and multiply them. He started to speak again and again and again to sickness in people, and people were transformed physically.

There's an entertaining reference in Luke 8 verse 22, where Jesus is planning to go from one side of the lake to the other, and it says, "Jesus said, 'Let us go to the other side of the lake.'" It was going to be through a storm, but because Jesus said, "Let us go to the other side of the lake," they were going, no matter what. But the disciples had to kind of get their heads round, "when he speaks, something happens".

A more obvious example of this is in John chapter 11, where Jesus is standing outside the tomb of his dead friend Lazarus, and he speaks: "Lazarus, come out!" And his words make reality bend to his will. When Jesus speaks something, things change.

Now here's a question just to consider. And you can just have a minute to ponder it. You can even share it between each other if you're with someone else or watching: who do you listen to most intently? Who do you go to when life as you know it is disturbed? Just have a think: who do you listen to most intensely. And who do you go to when life as you know it is disturbed? Just have a think. If you're on your own might want to make a note of something. Who do you listen

to? Can I just remind you, those of you who are Christians watching this or listening to this: do have a think back about the times when you have heard God intervene or seen God intervene, when he has shown you something or spoken in some way. Just take a moment and be still. Remember times in life when God has spoken to you or shown you something. Maybe again, just for a moment, put your hand over your own heart. The psalmist says, "Be still, my soul." He speaks to himself. Sometimes we have to tell ourselves, "Remember." "Remember what God has done already, what you what you know. Remember God's history with you."

So when Jesus is speaking in the Sermon on the Mount, "do not worry," this isn't just a rabbi; this isn't just good advice; this is God speaking. He's speaking tenderly, he's speaking pastorally, he's speaking wisely, he gives illustrations and reasons why they should not worry, but he's primarily speaking on the mount like Moses on behalf of God, he's speaking as God saying, "DO NOT WORRY." Now if we receive the words of Jesus as from God, the effect is different. How we receive things is different in their effect.

Now most of us will have kept up to speed with the briefings that the Prime Minister and other representatives have been holding over these last few days. Now if the Prime Minister, for example, tells vulnerable people to self-isolate, because he's the Prime Minister, a number of people will go, "yes we'll do that." We're aware of friends and family and church members who have chosen to do what the Prime Minister has instructed, because the Prime Minister has advice from people who know better than we do, and so we do what they say. But here is an order of magnitude different in terms of authority, in terms of what we should heed when Jesus speaks. Remember, when Jesus was doing the Sermon on the Mount, he knew that he himself was going to be crucified, he knew that he himself was going to rise from the dead. So this is a man who was going to be crucified and rise from the dead, telling us not to worry. Just think about that! If ever anyone in the world needed to worry, it should be someone who was anticipating their own crucifixion and he, because of who he was and because of his relationship with the Father, even that meant that he could speak out of peace and guide people towards "no anxiety, no worry".

So how do you receive the words of Jesus? When we hear him speak, we're not merely taking good advice. We're not merely obeying the rabbi's willing disciples who don't know who he is. The way in which we receive it most effectively is when we submit to what he is saying, when we submit to God and his words, and we allow the full force of his creative words to actually change us. So that when it's read, "Do not worry," the words go in.

Let me just show you something. This is my latest growing adventure: a number of you will remember that I love growing herbs and stuff and the coronavirus doesn't have any effect on basil. I planted these seeds, now seedlings, maybe about two and a half weeks ago, and they've been sitting on my office windowsill for the last weeks or so. I've got another couple of trays just like this, and I can confidently put seeds in, cover them with soil, water them, keep the temperature right, with utter faith they are going to grow. I absolutely believe that these wonderful little seeds I'm going to grow. I can pot them on and I can get a crop ready for salads, for endless pesto, I am absolutely sure that this is going to work. Why? Because I've done it before, and I trust the seed going into the good soil. I can see it! I can see it with my eyes, I've seen it with experience, I know what's going to happen. This year I'm going for about a hundred basil plants. I'm a little bit over the top with my interest in pesto I guess, but my point is this: experience tells me, this works.

The Bible tells me, Jesus knows what he's talking about. Jesus knows what he's talking about. Lindsey and I are doing some Bible readings together looking through Revelation, it's just a commentary that we're working through. And there's a phrase in there, where Jesus identifies himself in this way he says, "I am the Living One who was dead but is now alive forever and ever." It's like

his signature, he's saying, "Do you know who's talking to you? The Living One who was dead but is now alive for ever and ever." In other words he's saying, "Listen to who I am because of who I am."

It's like having confidence in the seeds: you have even greater confidence in Jesus. So that's to do with dealing with our present worries: he addresses our concerns where we are now. But Jesus goes even further than that in this passage. He says, "Seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." He's saying, "Don't worry about what you should eat, don't worry about what you shall wear: that's what the pagans chase after. Don't worry about things you can't control." Instead, seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given you as well. So not only does he give us a way of eliminating *present* worries by hearing his word, he displaces *future* worries too, by saying, "Don't think about you: live for me instead. Take your eyes off yourself and live for the King and his Kingdom."

At this time, perhaps more than ever, for a long time for some others, we need to hear Jesus again. This is not just about us getting through this. This is about God wanting to use us through this. When we start to live this way, worry is changed and it's replaced by trust. So just let me read to you again a few of the verses that you've already heard, and this time I want you to see if you can hear it from the Living One, not from me, but from the Living One.

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