

SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Lake Worth, Florida

The Eve of the Second Sunday after Pentecost (May 24, 2008)

Canon Richard T. Nolan

Proper 3A - MATTHEW 6:24-34

WORRYING

incorporating elements of earlier sermons

MAY AND JUNE

During May and June of each year, I experience significant reminders of things to worry about. This year Bob and I reach age 71 – closer to death than birth, a time in our lives when too many medical issues have intruded. There is much that my present health prevents us from doing, and Bob also has some age related health issues. After more than five decades together, am I about to become a burden to him? Will we be able to depart this life in a humane way with our wishes carried out? *Much to worry about these days!*

At this time I am reminded that I have been ordained a deacon for forty-five years and a priest for forty-three. There is much that I do not like about the evolving Episcopal Church, including some of our patterns of worship and what appears to me as a resurgence of superstition. Furthermore, the international mêlée over authority, power, and how to interpret the Bible has angered so many regional third-world Anglican Churches that an irreconcilable rift among us seems inevitable. *Much to worry about – and I haven't even mentioned the current natural disasters - and unnatural disasters like the economy, regional crime, the political climate, and so much else reported by the media!*

THROUGH THE YEARS

When you are a young child, you only worry about when you will get playtime and what toys you will play with. When you get a little older, you worry about school and friends. When you get to your teenage years, you begin you worry about dating and relationships, how you look, and some teenagers even worry about achieving high grades in school. Then, perhaps you worry what you will do after high school. For some, throughout college years you worry about what you are going to do with your life and how you will pay your college loans for tuition. After that, the real worrying just begins. Does anyone worry about paying basic bills or making ends meet? Do you ever worry about your future, perhaps plans that are in the making? Does anyone ever worry about their work, job security, or maybe retirement? Do any of you ever worry about different relationships you are involved in? Do any of you who are parents ever worry about your children – regardless of their ages?

Some people seem not to have a care in the world, but for the vast majority of us, life can at times be chaotic and full of stress. There are many things that we can worry about. They vary in importance with each of us and our unique circumstances and personal makeup.

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

If we allow the worries in this life to take charge of us, we would not have time for anything else. The bottom line is that life can be stressful and full of worry through all seasons of our lives, but I believe there is a better alternative than unwarranted worrying.

First of all, let me state emphatically that although God is ultimately in charge of the evolving universe(s) and does enter people's lives, the Lord of All has endowed humanity with significant responsibility to make their own decisions. *That* is one of the most basic themes throughout the Bible. God enters our lives with inspirational nudges, with power to cope, and with comforting and healing grace. However, you and I are not divinely controlled puppets! God is, indeed, in charge – but he shares a

significant portion of his personal freedom with us; God creates us “in his image.” To a great extent, we are responsible for our unfolding directions, although sometimes more powerful controls devastate our hopes and choices.

A BETTER ALTERNATIVE - THE GOOD NEWS

The Gospel passage read tonight is from Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount.” Many Christians interpret all of Jesus’ words, including the “Sermon” as absolute laws to enact fully in their lives right away. I am among the many *other* Christians who understand the “Sermon” as designed to open our eyes to what love can mean when God’s Will is *fully* lived. It represents symbolically the way faithful people will think, feel, and behave in a future, perfected world - the ever-emerging “Kingdom of God.” As such, the great “Sermon” is meant to shatter conventional earth-bound images of a truly satisfying existence. It is intended to stir us to seek God’s mercy and forgiveness while we live our imperfect lives and to move forward along the righteous path toward truly abundant, worry-free living.

In tonight’s fragment of the magnificent “Sermon” we can benefit from applying Jesus teachings right now by beginning not to worry *unduly*, not to be disproportionately *anxious*, to trust that God will provide necessities *according to God’s own outlook*. I realize that these scriptural words can be misunderstood as an excuse for taking little or no responsibility for one’s life, that we should trust God to provide *everything* we need as we sit idly by. Yet, as one commentator notes, the challenge to trust in God does *“not exclude working and having property. The words are directed to people involved with sowing, reaping, storing in barns, toiling, and spinning, but who are called to see that their life is not based on these things.”* (from *The New Interpreter’s Bible*) Moreover, those living now in the dawning Kingdom of God are assured that their most basic needs in the Kingdom-yet-to-come will be met by God with no need to fret. What a wonderful existence is depicted for faithful disciples living in that yet unrealized Kingdom!

Jesus’ guidance runs counter to common perceptions both then and now. Our own culture propels rich and poor alike toward high anxieties -- to keep people consuming, to keep us too busy, to keep us competitive in everything we do, to grasp at too much control, and to sustain in our imaginations that the best possible life is for those who have the most control and most “stuff.” With this weighing on our hearts and minds, our priorities can lead to extraordinary anxieties about whether we will *have* enough or *be* enough. It follows that *the more worried we are, the less loving we can be; the less loving we are, the less satisfied and thankful we’ll be for what we already have and who we already are.* The Lord’s teachings are designed to help you and me move away from obsessions that create and sustain chronic *acute* worrying; his declarations inspire us toward a state of maturing love with our basic priorities set on our fundamental relationships with God, our neighbors and ourselves.

In the meantime, what is the answer for you and for me? Must we accept the inevitability of being tossed about by troubles – remedied superficially by temporary band aids and rare moments of solace that quickly lose effectiveness? Must we wait for God to do something about it for us? Or, is there something we can do to redeem our own circumstances and be saved from idols that assault us with the opposites of what they promise? Where is significant relief for us *now*?

I have a tendency toward worrying too much, but although, like you, I have some significant *concerns*, I do value some beliefs that help me transform worries into *concerns about which I care.* Repeatedly in my home we turn to a version of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr’s “Serenity Prayer” - *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.*

You and I cannot choose everything that happens to us, and we cannot remedy all the world's troubles. We do not and cannot yet live in the perfect world described by Christ in so many of his teachings. Nevertheless, we can choose to a large extent how we respond to troubles: as grumpy, guilt-ridden, frenzied, worried individuals or with realistic boundaries implied by the Serenity Prayer.

Not much to worry about anymore; however, a lot to care about, and a challenge “to change the things I can.”

THE READING - MATTHEW 6:24-34

Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you-- you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

"So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

OXFORD BIBLE COMMENTARY

(6:19–34) The four paragraphs which make up this passage have to do with earthly treasure—vv. 19–21 with not storing it up, vv. 22–3 with being generous, v. 24 with serving God instead of mammon, and vv. 25–34 with not being anxious about food and clothing.

The passage contains three antitheses—earth/heaven (vv. 19–21), darkness/light (vv. 22–3), wealth (=mammon)/God (v. 24). The focus of the first is the heart, the second the eye, the third service. The determination of the heart to store up treasure in heaven or on earth creates either inner light or darkness while the resultant state of one's 'eye' (intent) moves one to serve either God or mammon. So one's treasure tells the tale of one's heart.

vv. 22–3 do not liken the eyes to a window but to a lamp (cf. Dan 10:6; Zech 4; *b. Šabb.* 151b). The picture is not of light going in but of light going out. This accords with the common pre-modern understanding of vision, according to which the eyes have their own light (so e.g. Plato and Augustine). To say that when one's eye is 'healthy' (generous, cf. Prov 22:9; *m. Abot* 2.19) one is full of light means that generosity is proof of the light within—just as to say that when one's eye is 'unhealthy' (ungenerous, cf. 20:15) one is full of darkness means that covetousness is a sign of inner darkness. vv. 24–34 follow 19–23 as encouragement follows demand. The commands to serve God instead of mammon, especially when interpreted in the light of the rest of the gospel (e.g. 5:39–42; 19:16–30), are difficult, and their observance will bring insecurity. So vv. 24–34 are the pastor's addendum: they are respite from the storm that is the SM. Those who undertake the hard demands of the gospel have a Father in heaven who gives good gifts to his children.

b. Babylonian Talmud

Šabb. *Šabbat*

m. *Mishnah*

HARPER'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

6:19-7:11, Instructions for the Community.

These instructions are loosely attached to the Lord's Prayer. Verses 19-34, which contain teaching on wealth, can be connected with the petition, "Give us today enough bread for tomorrow" (v. 11). Matt. 7:1-5, on judging, may be linked to the petition on forgiveness (v. 12). Less plausibly perhaps, 7:6, on casting pearls before swine, may be tied in with 6:13, the petition for delivery from trials and evil. The longer section on prayer (7:7-11) is obviously a continuation of the teaching in 6:5-15. Most of this material is inserted by Matthew into the sermon from other parts of Q: Matt. 6:19-21 = Luke 12:33-34; Matt. 6:22-23 = Luke 11:34-36; Matt. 6:24 = Luke 16:13; Matt. 6:25-34 = Luke 12:22-31; Matt. 7:7-11 = Luke 11:9-13. Only in Matt. 7:1-5 is Matthew following the Great Sermon from Q (= Luke 6:37-38, 41-42); Matt. 7:6 is from M. 6:19-24, On Treasures. We have here three distinct sayings (vv. 19-21, 22-23, 24) that were probably independent traditions. They all have a poetic structure characteristic of Jesus. Matthew has added v. 24 from elsewhere in Q (= Luke 16:13) to the first two. This combination provides a clue to his understanding of the two sayings about the single eye: it is an eye that is exclusively fixed upon the service of God and not on material possessions. Thus, **the whole unit serves to introduce the following unit on anxiety. 6:25-34, On Anxiety.** It will clarify Matthew's understanding of these sayings if we reconstruct their earlier history. Stage 1: Jesus was not addressing humanity in general or even Israel in particular but his disciples, those who had accepted his message of the coming Reign of God. They are to renounce their earthly callings and possessions to follow him and proclaim his message. Theirs was to be the radical obedience of itinerant charismatic preachers (cf. the rich young man, Mark 10:17-31 = Matt. 19:16-30). Stage 2: without losing the primary meaning they had for Jesus, the injunctions are now treated as conventional wisdom teaching about riches (vv. 27-29)—you don't gain anything by being anxious. Stage 3: Matthew's church no longer consisted of itinerant charismatics but was a settled community of the relatively well-to-do. Accordingly, the Evangelist prefaces the unit with the sayings on the single eye and serving two masters. Matthean Christians do not have to give up their possessions, but they must get their priorities straight. Thus, Matthew adds the word "first" to the injunction "seek God's reign" (v. 33) plus "and its [or his, God's] righteousness," the better righteousness of the antitheses and the devout precepts. It is worth noting that Matthew's Jesus addresses those "of little faith" (v. 30), a favorite designation for Matthew's church. A puny faith has many consequences; one is that it leads people to trust in uncertain riches and therefore makes them prone to anxiety. 7:1-5, On Judging. This unit represents a combination of two separate traditions. The first saying (vv. 1-2) is couched in the second person plural (you). The string of sayings that follows (vv. 3-5) is addressed to the individual (thou). This is an important clue to their meaning. Jesus prohibited his itinerant charismatics as a body from going to law courts in any circumstances. Q individualized this teaching: the post-Easter community did not condemn law courts as such but expected its members not to go to law when they had disputes with one another (cf. 1 Cor. 6:1-11). Matthew, in turn, places these injunctions in the

¹Barton, John ; Muddiman, John: *Oxford Bible Commentary*. New York : Oxford University Press, 2001, S. Mt 6:19

v. verse

Q Qumran

vv. verses

context of the teaching on material possessions: those who get their priorities straight with regard to such possessions will never want to go to law.^{7:6}, On Not Desecrating the Holy. It is hard to fit this saying into what we know of the Jesus who consorted with the outcast and who healed lepers. It must be an expression of the exclusiveness of the narrowly Jewish Christian community that formulated the M tradition. How did the Evangelist himself understand it? That is even more puzzling now that his community had embarked upon a mission to the Gentiles. The *Didache* (9:5) applied the saying to the Eucharist, which is to be withheld from the profane. Given the affinities between Matthew's community and the audience for the *Didache* (they shared the Lord's Prayer and baptism in the threefold name) we may conjecture that Matthew understood it in the same way. It is, however, difficult to relate it to the context in which Matthew has placed it.^{7:7-11}, Confidence in Prayer. This unit exhibits many characteristics of Jesus' speech: poetic structure, the divine passive ("it will be given to you . . . it will be opened to you," i.e., God will give . . . God will open), the picturesque illustrations (bread/stone; fish/serpent), the argument from the less to the greater ("if . . . how much more"), the realism about human nature ("you, being evil"). Above all, Jesus was absolutely certain of the goodness of God, his Abba, who was drawing near in Jesus' own ministry. It is coherent with Jesus' message that he should seek to inculcate the same confidence not in humanity in general, but specially in those who had responded to his message. The "good things" are the blessings of God's coming Reign, the things Jesus taught his disciples to pray for in the Our Father.

Q was already aware of the relation between this unit and the Our Father. In Luke 11:9-13, this teaching on prayer follows almost immediately after the Lord's Prayer (11:2-4). Jesus and Matthew have been criticized for naïveté and lack of realism. But that is because the very specific context of this teaching—its relation to the coming Reign of God—has been ignored and the promise generalized.

²Mays, James Luther ; Harper & Row, Publishers ; Society of Biblical Literature: *Harper's Bible Commentary*. San Francisco : Harper & Row, 1996, c1988, S. Mt 6:19