

What do we worry about today. By a strange coincidence, we were talking about this at Bible and Banter on Wednesday and we came up with a frighteningly long list from relationships and employment to climate change and nuclear war. We talked about how, for some people, these anxieties can be all-consuming, even life-threatening, so that they fail to see the many things in this world that are good and beautiful.

Is that what Jesus is getting at, when he tells us not to worry? That worrying too much will keep us from experiencing God.

But then worry can be positive, as well as negative and our concerns can prompt us to action. To prayer, to choices about lifestyle and, if we're feeling brave enough, to campaigning for changes to unjust structures. Is that what Jesus meant. Don't spend all your time worrying but get off your backsides and do something!

But what Jesus actually said was, Do not worry about what you are going to eat. Do not worry about what you will wear. God provides for the birds and the lilies, He will provide for you. Only pagans and Gentiles worry about such things. And for Matthew writing for a largely Jewish audience, to liken his readers to pagans or Gentiles would have been quite an insult.

And actually, what most of us don't have to worry about is food to eat or clothes to wear. Yes, we have to plan a bit and we have to manage our money, but many people in this country probably have too much food and too many clothes. Though we are all too well aware, that over the centuries, millions upon millions of people have died from a basic lack of food, water and clothing, through no fault of their own. Is Jesus really condemning them along with pagans and gentiles?

So what *is* Jesus saying here? And what should we be taking from it in our own time? I'm sure it's not as simple as saying we can leave everything to God's providence alone, without having to do anything. We need, if we can, to contribute to society, to earn and manage money and to provide for our old age. God calls all who are able to play an active part in providing for human need and caring for creation.

So, superficially, this lesson is not as easy to understand as we might think. But I don't think that at heart it is about either worrying too much or indeed worrying too little.

To understand more about it, we need to go back a bit. Because, at the end of Matthew 6, we are well into the Sermon on the Mount. It's worth re-reading Matthew 5-7, to realise again what a wide range of teaching it covers: from the Beatitudes, through advice on prayer and almsgiving to not storing up treasure on earth and not being able to serve God and wealth. And none of these commands are easy. We're not always as good at following these as we would wish, but we know, deep inside ourselves, that if more people followed the way of Jesus, people would be able to live together in more compassionate, peaceful and just way.

In our Old Testament lesson, we have heard the story of how God created the world in all its complexity and beauty. And at every stage, God looked at what he had made and was glad. Then finally, the pinnacle of that creation, God created humankind, giving them free will to care for it as they wish and once again, Genesis says, God rejoiced because it was good. But, as we are all too aware, we've not done a very good job, as our list of worries and anxieties illustrated only too well.

Then in the epistle we have heard that evocative passage when Paul writes to the Romans about how the creation is groaning as it awaits the glory that is to come.

The world is not as God would have it be and we are longing for the coming of his kingdom, not just in the future but in the here and now in the lives of all God's children.

So to make sense of today's deceptively simple gospel, we have to look at that final verse. Seek the kingdom of God, And we won't do that by worrying only about the basic necessities of life, but by living more fully according to the Kingdom values that Jesus is describing in his long Sermon on the Mount. So perhaps the very first worry on our list last week, should have been, Have I been seeking God's kingdom.

One of my, many, favourite books is Fifth Chinese daughter by Jade Snow Wong. It tells of how she grew up in a strict Chinese, Christian family in San Francisco's China Town in the 1930's. In her late teens, Jade Snow has to go to hospital and her little brother comes excitedly to see her. Can I come and sit on the bed with you, he asks. Yes of course, answers his Big Sister, but first of all you must take off your shoes. No, Big Sister, she is reprimanded seriously, First of all, you must seek the Kingdom of God. OK, she says. Seek the Kingdom of God, then take off your shoes!

This has, over the years, often made me smile, but it has also made me think. How often do I seek God's kingdom first of all? How often do I spend too much time thinking about the mundane details and worries of everyday life and too little time thinking about seeking God's kingdom and doing what I can to change those things that worry us and help to grow the kingdom here on earth.

So when you get home this morning, before you take your shoes off, before you think about lunch, remember that, First of all, you must always seek the kingdom of God. Amen