

The Second Sunday before Lent (Year A)

Can you imagine what it might be like to spend your whole life carrying a heavy backpack or dragging a heavy ball and chain shackled to your ankles? That is exactly what many of us do and it comes in the form of fear and anxiety. Its burden prevents us from being the people that God created us to be. We spend far too much time in our heads either dwelling on the past or worrying about the future and less time living in the present moment (which is the only time that there is). As Corrie Ten Boom once said:

Worrying is carrying tomorrow's load with today's strength – carrying two days at once. It is moving into tomorrow ahead of time.

The Hebrew word for worry is *daag* is a compound of fear and sorrow and something that affects the whole of our being. That is what worry does, it disturbs our peace of mind like waves on the sea. It takes a grip of us and shakes the vitality out of us. It has its roots in an Old English word *worien* – which meant 'to grasp by the throat with the teeth and lacerate or kill by biting and shaking'. Much like a wild animal grabbing its prey by the throat and vigorously shaking it.

The spiritual writer Eckhart Tolle sums up worry when he says: 'it (worry) pretends to be necessary but has no useful purpose'. So why on earth do we want to live with it? Jesus said to his disciples: "I have come that you might have life, life in all its fullness" (John 10:10) But I wonder how many of us truly experience that each moment of the day? We often get glimpses but for many it does not last. We become preoccupied with the cares and concerns of life that chokes and strangle our *joie de vie*.

First Century life was tough for many and it was to these people that Jesus said these words:

'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.'

At first glance, harsh and challenging words perhaps, but Jesus said them for a reason. He went on to say that life itself was more important than food, the body and clothing. Interestingly, the Greek word for life is the same word as for soul that offers a bit more clarity. Perhaps Jesus was saying that our inner being or soul is far more important. Why? Because it is eternal unlike the physical which at the end of the day is temporal. Jesus directs them to look and reflect on the natural world – the birds of the air, the lilies in the fields. All living things are dependent on God's providential care. We are temporal – here one day gone the next. Jesus cites the example of the grass in the fields as a good example. Jesus points out the beautiful lilies of the field that don't toil and strive, yet whose intrinsic beauty reflects the very glory of God.

Our Old Testament lesson from Genesis reminds us that all God's creation is blessed, particularly humankind because we are made in God's image as the pinnacle of God's creation. If this is the case, we have no reason to allow ourselves be overcome by worry. For worry is a consequence of the fall of humankind. A process that resulted in us losing that unique sense of the presence of God in our lives - minute-by-minute, day by day. Paul in his letter to the Church in Rome touches on this when he describes creation suffering decay and waiting for redemption with eager longing.

God sent his Son Jesus into the world so that relationship – that sense of presence might be restored. Yet we have time and time again failed to grasp the huge significance that it should make to our lives. God wants us to be whole to be complete – the Hebrew word for

peace *shalom* captures the essence of this. It is a peace that passes all understanding that transcends our physical circumstances; that is the complete antithesis of anxiety and worry.

Jesus said:

'But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.'

The kingdom of God is recognizing God's indwelling presence in our lives minute-by-minute. It's a life of faith that rests not in the security of possessions or money but rather putting God first in our lives and trusting that God will provide. Yes, it is frightening and uncomfortable because it moves us out of our personal comfort zone and forces us to be utterly dependent on God. But when we do so God works and blesses us beyond anything that we could imagine. Anxiety is replaced by a deep peace and inner contentment. Is this unattainable? Categorically 'No!' Jesus wouldn't have said it if it was.

Fr Andy