

Finding a balance in life

A sermon preached by the *Revd Viv Bridges* at the 9.30am service at All Saints, Wytham and at the 12.00 noon service at St Peter's, Wolvercote on Sunday 27th February 2011

Genesis ch.1, v.1 – ch.2, v.3 and Matthew, ch.6, v.25-end.

Our reading this morning from St Matthew's Gospel is one of the most beautiful passages of the Bible and therefore probably one of the most well-known; but I think it's also one of the most difficult.

I expect that throughout the ages, people have said 'We live in a difficult time' and it's the same today. We live in an age of great contrast; at one end of the spectrum are the many people who are obsessed with 'being in control', they work at a furious pace, often in the pursuit of wealth, or influence, or the perfect body. At the other end of the spectrum are those thousands the world over who have absolutely nothing, and so have no control whatsoever over any part of their lives. Somewhere in between are many more who, in this economic climate, are frightened for their jobs, for their homes, for the support they need in their everyday lives. So to ask people to 'take no thought for your life, what you shall eat and what you shall drink' seems rather foolish. But Christ's words were never foolish, so it's important to look carefully at the words we've heard to see if they mean the same to us today as they meant to Jesus and his listeners.

Jesus used the phrase 'take no thought' a number of times. In new versions of the Bible this is usually translated 'do not worry' but other phrases can be found in older versions. Wycliffe said 'be not busy to your life'. Tyndale used 'be not careful for your life'... and by 'careful' he meant *full* of care. This is perhaps closer to what Jesus meant. The Greek word used is 'merimnan', which means to be over anxious, to be troubled with cares, and it is this sort of worry that Jesus meant. He didn't mean that we shouldn't take *any* thought about what we eat and drink etc..this would be foolhardy ... and in fact the birds have to work extremely hard to keep themselves alive. It's right that we are prudent and do what is necessary for our own well-being and the well-being of those we love. But what Jesus doesn't want us to do is to never let go of thinking about tomorrow.

Some of you may be familiar with the Myers Briggs method of describing personality. There are 4 main classifications and it's the combination that is actually the most important, but one of the classifications is 'Perceiving' or 'Judging', 'P' or 'J'. This is *very* loosely to do with whether you prefer to stay open to new information and options as long as possible (P), or to get things sorted out, organised, as soon as possible (J).

People who are 'P' types are often 'spur of the moment', they wait for inspiration. They can often leave things until the last minute ... and usually still manage to accomplish them. They, of course, find it difficult to understand the way 'J' type people work. J types need to be well-organised, they will plan things, sort them out way in advance. I am a J type. One of the advantages of this is that I'm usually (not always of course) quite well-prepared for things, but the disadvantage is that I often spend far too long in the preparation and often find it very difficult to 'switch off' even if I've done all I can for the moment. *This* is what Jesus is asking us to guard against... this neurotic worrying. As he suggests, it 'will not add one cubit to our stature', rather it will make us 'bent with worry' and may actually shorten our lives. So, as

with so many things, it's a question of balance – working out what *needs* to be done and once that's done, letting go.

'Well', someone might still say, 'this is all very well for those of us who are fortunate enough to have enough money, skill and support to provide for ourselves with a sensible amount of fore-thought, and who are comparatively fit and healthy. But what about those for whom this is not the case?' It's easy to understand that many people can't help worrying if they have just lost their job, or if their benefits are about to be cut, or if they have lost their homes in floods or hurricanes or violence, or if they are suffering painful illness, or looking after someone who is ill. How can we expect them to 'let go' and trust in God to provide for them?

For me, the only answer to this is the example of so many people who actually do manage to do so. I'm sure you've seen on the news, read in the papers, spoken to people, who are going through the most dreadful crises of one sort or another and yet are able to say 'I still have great faith in God, I'm sure he will eventually bring me out of this'. Or they say 'Whatever happens, I trust that God will bring some good out of it'. We see it whenever there are natural disasters, and it's true of many people who have suffered great loss or who are affected by painful illness. So they do exactly what Jesus asks them to do, they do what they can but then they leave things in God's hands. These people give us examples of enormous faith and trust, and the amazing thing is that this faith and trust often transforms the situation those people are in. Places of despair and hopelessness are turned into places of hope, in which love and trust are shown to their utmost.

It seems, then, it is possible for people to have enough trust in God to find the balance, to do what can be done and then let go into God's hands. So what about us? Each of us will have different practical needs and necessities, different difficulties in our lives, and I suspect that there are many like me who don't 'let go' enough. But I know I must make a determined effort to stop working when I've done enough for the time-being, because if I don't I can get so absorbed by 'the work', by the things of 'the world', that my focus is turned away from God. And I believe that is what Jesus is really trying to teach us ... that if we worry too much about things of the world we shall lose our relationship with him. We must take time to concentrate on God, his love for us, shown especially in Jesus Christ, and make space to be able to hear and receive his Spirit.

In a way our Old Testament reading helped us with this. It was rather long (*the story of Creation*) but it meant we had to concentrate for a bit longer on God's creation and love and we heard that very important verse 'on the seventh day *God rested*'.

Let us pray that we may allow the Holy Spirit to help us work out our own balance of life so that we have enough time to concentrate on God: time, perhaps, to watch the birds of the air, consider those lilies of the field, and give thanks to God for his goodness.

Amen