

"FORESIGHT, FRETTING AND FAITH"

INTRODUCTION

Some of us over the years have had difficulty with certain parts of the Sermon on the Mount. Take, for instance, those lines that were read earlier in the service:

"Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on.....Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself"

I have the suspicion that there may be some mental reservations lurking in our minds concerning those words, because they seem to suggest a casual, careless indifference toward the future, in contrast to the foresight and planning for the future that we have been taught to regard as necessary.

Perhaps those of us who were brought up with the King James Version of the Bible see the contrast even more sharply. The older version put it this way: "Take no thought for tomorrow". Indeed - we are wary of the literal application of this advice. For in our own lives - and in the lives of others - we see the consequences of a complete thoughtlessness about the future. And so people live beyond their means, satisfy the whims of the moment, buy what they will and neglect any plan of payment. "Fly now - pay later". "Order these records now - we'll bill you later". The collection agencies and the lean companies thrive because so many people literally have "taken no thought for tomorrow".

DEVELOPMENT OF THEME

We see the high cost of unconcern about tomorrow reflected in different ways. For instance, young people come to the threshold of college or a vocation and belatedly wish that they had some stronger foundations of preparation. Or older folks come to the threshold of retirement and too late realize that they have neglected some preparation for leisure, through lack of attention to health or hobbies or finances or friends. Is it not true that people of all ages indulge themselves - follow some fad - appease some appetite - and then, too late, they discover they are encumbered with consequences for themselves and others which they had not foreseen.

A Broadway star, so the story goes, once talked a doctor into giving her a prescription for sleeping pills. "Be careful about taking these too often" he cautioned, "they can become habit-forming". "Don't be silly" she scoffed. "I've been taking them every night for twenty years and they have not become a habit yet". It's both a comic and tragic commentary on our age - a lot of people make fools of themselves because they never consider the consequences of what they are doing today.

Some of us have felt a certain sympathy with the Hippie Movement in our time. We thought we could see in it a valid protest against much that is false in our modern society - the preoccupation with possession and position - and we could even imagine a certain affinity between the flower people at their best and saints like Francis of Assisi with his unconcern about so much that the world holds to be of importance. And yet - does not the popular version of the Hippie movement finally fall apart at the point of irresponsibility, a lack of foresight for the future. A friend of mine who recently was in San Francisco found his fascination for the Hippies giving way to concern when he saw the lines of Hippies forming for the meals which had to be provided by the churches or by the city. This carries the "take no thought for the morrow" philosophy to its absurd extremes. For someone must take

some thought about tomorrow - and a society or a person that knows nothing about foresight and responsible preparation for the future winds up more slave than free - more dependent than independent.

Mind you - it was not this kind of irresponsibility that Jesus was encouraging. Again and again, in other connections, he came up on the side of foresight and planning. He did it in the parable about a man who proposed to build a tower.

"Which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying 'This man began to build and was not able to finish!...'"

He did it in another parable, in which he showed no sympathy for five young ladies who had neglected to provide oil for their lamps at a midnight celebration, while five others had the foresight to prepare. And he ended that parable by saying,

"Watch, therefore....be ready....for you know neither the day nor the hour"....

As he preached, so he practiced. After his baptism, he went into the wilderness to prepare for his ministry ahead. Along the way, he saw the cross looming before him, and he set out to prepare himself and his disciples for that event. And in so many ways, he sought to lift his disciples' eyes to the future - to develop their talents, build their resources, consider the consequences. "Which of you - desiring to build - does not first sit down and count the cost...."

And there are plenty of people who need that word of encouragement to show a greater concern for tomorrow as they live today. Concern for the way they are preparing for opportunities in education and vocation that might be theirs. Concern about the heritage of character and influence that they leave. Concern about the consequences of some conduct that entices them. Concern about the future of a home - or a church - or a nation - or a world. "Which of you, desiring to build, does not first sit down and count the cost?"

DO NOT BE ANXIOUS

But now - against that background - go back to the portion of the Sermon on the Mount with which we started. It must be clear that Jesus here was not speaking out against all foresight. Scholars tell us that the Revised Standard Version has a translation of an important word which is more accurate and true than the old translation. So that instead of, "take no thought for the morrow" it properly reads "do not be anxious about tomorrow". That word 'anxious' appears six times in that short section. So Jesus was here concerned about people becoming excessively anxious and fretful.

If there is a portion of the population today that tends to be under-anxious about the future, there is at least as great a number of persons who tend to be over-anxious. Rightly so does W. H. Auden call this, "The Age of Anxiety". People have so many worries that get in the drivers' seats of their lives. We worry about our children - about their safe journey from an outing - and about their safe journey through life. We worry about an assignment tomorrow and about an adversity that might come to us ten years from now. We worry about health and jobs and money. We worry about flying and driving and eating and breathing and living and dying.

It is a mark of our time that there are more than 75 different phobias described in the dictionary - all the way from "ergophobia" which means the fear of work to "phobophobia" which means the fear of all things. We may escape the phobias, but most of us encounter the worries. L. P. Jacks speaks an honest word for a great many of us when he writes in his autobiography:

"I cannot recall a single hour, not even in childhood, when I was entirely free from anxiety for the morrow, from discomfort, sometimes acute - sometimes faints, but always present, caused by uncertainty about what would happen next".

It is this uncertainty, this uneasiness, this fretfulness that plagues so many moderns. And to this worrisome side of our nature, Jesus addresses those words: "Don't be anxious....." Look at the living things in the world around you and learn from them, he said. Those ravens coming across the sky, do they spend their time worrying because they have no stored-up food? And those lilies that make the fields so beautiful, do they have to agonize about clothes to wear? And of course - it's oversimplified - because humans do live at a different level than the birds of the air and the flowers of the field - but nonetheless, it is a quiet and well-deserved rebuke to so much of the fear and anxiety, tension and worry that we live with. "Don't be anxious about tomorrow"...

ANXIETY IS FOOLISH

Why? For one thing - anxiety is foolish. People spend so much time and energy worrying about things that never come to pass, and then while they are anxiously peering out of one window looking for the shadow of some anticipated difficulty, some other unexpected problem slips in at the side door. One woman who realized that her fears were ruining her life, made for herself a "Worry Table" in which she tabulated her fears. After keeping track of her fears and the actual realities of her life for a period of time, she made the following figures:

- 40% - about things that never happen.
- 30% - about old decisions which I cannot alter.
- 12% - about others' criticism of me, which should be accepted or disposed of - not dwelt on.
- 10% - about my health, which gets worse as I worry.
- 8% - legitimate, since life has some real problems...to meet.

And this, I feel, is quite typical - nine times as many fears asking for room and board in our lives as have any real basis for occupancy. So many of our worries are really just plain foolish.

ANXIETY IS FAITHLESS

But more to the Christian point - anxiety is faithless.

And this is what Jesus was getting at in that passage.... "Don't be anxious....O men of little faith.....your Heavenly Father knows what you need". This is so central to the style of Jesus' life. He said we could expect trouble, and he claimed no immunity in his own life. But he also said that we could expect a sufficient strength and grace for the testing places. The heart of the Christian assurance is this assurance that we shall not run out of power and that we cannot be fully defeated, that the power behind us is far greater than the tasks that are before us.

On the night that Martin Luther King was assassinated, Senator Robert Kennedy, your will recall, was campaigning in Indianapolis. After he had paid tribute to Dr. King, he closed with a beautiful quotation from the Greek poet, Aeschylus:

"In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God".

Those words were spoken five centuries before Christ, but how clearly they illuminate the crucifixion and all suffering. In everything that happens to us, God is at work with an awe-filled grace. "Your Father knows what you need". Is not this what Bonhoeffer was talking about in a note he wrote from the Nazi prison shortly before his execution:

"I believe God will give us all the power we need to resist in all time of distress, but he never gives it in advance, lest we should rely upon ourselves and not on him alone"

There is a phrase which one occasionally hears spoken in modern conversation. It is the phrase "stay loose" - and I understand it means to be relaxed, to be unworried, to be unconcerned. Whether or not the phrase is a part of our style of speech or not, it should be a part of our life-style - a certain care-free assurance which does not discourage foresight, but does displace fretful anxiety. And this because God has come through to us in One who makes clear and present all sufficient love and strength.

And so it is that the New Testament contains some rather clear and simple promises that we need to carry with us through the week day. "Don't be anxious. Your Father knows what you need. My grace is sufficient....Nothing can separate us from the love of God". And so there are some who would thank God for the people and the places that have shamed our fretfulness and reminded us that the promises are true and that a person can face the future with a song something like those beautiful lines written by John Greenleaf Whittier:

"I know not what the future hath
Of marvel or surprise;
Assured alone that life and death
His mercy underlies".

And if my heart and flesh are weak
To bear an untried pain,
The bruised reed He will not break,
But strengthen and sustain.

I know not where His islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond his love and care"

LET US PRAY

O God, who hast given us the mind whereby we may anticipate danger, give us also the grace by which we may go from day to day trusting in thy care, caring not too much about the little, unimportant things, but only for the things that count and are truly great. Free us from anxiety, so that we may walk bravely and without fear, through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen