

"THE FAITHFUL AND THE FRETFUL"

INTRODUCTION

Once a very wise teacher was talking to a group of people who, by our standards, had every reason to be anxious. They lived in a country occupied by a foreign power. They lived under the clouds of war and insurrection. They paid about 40% of their meager income in taxation. They had no social security benefits or life insurance or pension programs. They had no health departments or hospitals to help in the prevention or the treatment of illness. They had no adequate protection from robbers and revolutionaries who roamed their country and threatened their travels. But to these people, beset as they were by so many handicaps and hazards, this teacher gave an incredible word of advice. He said to them, "Do not be anxious".

Moreover, anyone looking into the life of this teacher might observe that he, too, had ample cause for concern in his own life. He had left the security of a job and the comfort of a home. He never knew exactly where the next meal or the next night's lodging was coming from. He had to contend with the jealousies and the frailties of the companions he had gathered. He was beginning to encounter both the resistance of people who were suspicious of change and the hostility of the authorities who felt threatened. His future looked anything but calm and serene, and yet still he could say, "Do not be anxious".

At the end of the discourse in which this teacher spoke these words, it is noted that the people were astonished, "for he spoke as one having authority". And evidently his disciples felt that way, too. For they preserved his words, not as the far-out talk of some dreamer, but as the sound advice, the sound guidance of one whose words were simply the reflection of the way in which he lived - and came to lead others to life. The teacher: Jesus of Nazareth. His words are from the SOM

DEVELOPMENT

When the Sermon on the Mount deals with anxiety, it is dealing with one of the basic problems of our contemporary life situation. And before we probe what Jesus of Nazareth said in this connection, ponder for a moment what he did not say. He never promised his followers an untroubled life. Indeed, it was just the opposite - "In this world you shall have tribulation". And in case we fail to hear his words, we must surely see his way. For where did his way of life get him, but a cross? And where did his way of life get his disciples - and Paul - and scores of others across the centuries who have faithfully followed his style of life. Trouble? Men do not escape it because they are Christians. More often than not, they encounter it because they have followed Christ.

So it was not the untroubled life that Jesus was placing before men. But rather it was the untroubled mind. Even that doesn't imply freedom from sorrow or tension or fear. They are all part of the human condition, and all have their saving ministries to perform. Halford Luccock used to say that the best example of the right use of tension is in the mainspring of a watch. You've got to have it if the watch is active and accurate. So you need a measure of it in a life that is alert and responsible.....but the untroubled mind is a characteristic state of confidence and poise and peace - as opposed to a chronic state of anxiety and fussing and fretting. "Do not be anxious" so Jesus spoke, and so he lived, and his words still have authority for us today.

MIXED UP GOALS

Suppose we consider some of the things that he said about anxiety by way of diagnosis and prescription. For all of the times I have read and preached on this passage with the recurring theme, "Do not be anxious" I had never stopped to ponder the first word of this passage which is "therefore" - and which clearly represents something of a bridge with the words just preceding. And these are the words:

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon".

Apparently then, even in his own day, Jesus saw some connection between anxiety and materialism. It wasn't that Jesus condemned money and material things. But it was that he condemned the worship of money and material things. We have a tendency to misquote a later New Testament verse and to refer to "money as the root of all evil". That isn't what the verse says. It says, "The love of money is the root of all evil". And that is what Jesus was concerned about - the worship of mammon, the worship of riches.

It's amazing how much contemporary anxiety is somehow related to the struggle for security. Not bread and butter and clothing and shelter. Jesus saw the need for these. But rather possessions and position - success and status and prestige. The anxiety comes with the striving to achieve - and the concern to guard and protect the achievement - and the emptiness of the achievement. Strange that our time is variously referred to both as the "age of affluence" and the "age of anxiety".

I think it's hard to say when a person comes to worship mammon. It's such a subtle process. But we need to beware when we begin to worship money, when we begin to realize that we are never satisfied with what we have and that we are always wanting something more and something other. I've always been fond of Dr. Sockman's comment that the trouble with keeping up with the Joneses is that just when you have caught up with John Jones, you discover that there is a Sylvester Llewellyn Jones, in a finer house farther up the hill, and that he is now the Jones to catch up with. Or the comment of John D. Rockefeller when someone asked him, "How much wealth is enough?" - and he replied, "Just a little more".

And said Jesus, if this is your main goal, to make lots of money, to be on easy street, then you are always going to be uneasy, confronted with an emptiness in life. He put it in sharp, uncomfortable language, "If we serve mammon, we despise God". Roger Shinn, the New Testament scholar, commenting on that passage says in one of his books:

"A strong word! But day in and day out people, including church men, do despise God. When a physician turns his back on human need to enjoy a more profitable practice, he despises God. When a youth chooses his lifework, thinking only of what he can get rather than what he can give, he despises God. When a clergyman moves up the social scale by pleasing congregation and dulling the sharp word of God, he despises God".

And each of us can think of how it ~~might apply to him~~ touches his own life!

The point is - there's a tremendous amount of anxiety in the world today caused by mixed-up values and goals. We all experience something of the conflict of goals and goods. Deep within us is at least the glimmer of a response of love and of service, and of sacrifice. But conflicting with them are the counter-drives: ambition, prestige, comfort, financial security. And Jesus is simply saying that the untroubled mind stems from serving God and his purpose rather than mammon and its thirsts and appetites.

A DAY AT A TIME

Now a second prescription that Jesus offered had to do with taking things a day at a time. "Do not be anxious about tomorrow" he said. This was not an injunction against proper foresight and planning,

but it was a warning against the human tendency to try to bear tomorrow's burdens today. There's an Oriental proverb which goes: "HE IS MISERABLE ONCE WHO FEELS IT, BUT TWICE WHO FEARS IT BEFORE IT COMES"

Many of you, I'm sure, have either worshipped in or at least visited the Riverside Church here in the city. The man who retired as the chief minister there about two years last Spring was that delightful Scotsman, Dr. Robert James McCracken. I had the privilege ten years ago of taking a course in preaching under Dr. McCracken at Union Seminary. For twenty years, Dr. McCracken ministered there with high distinction, and upon his retirement, a grateful church and community looked back on twenty fruitful years. But at the beginning of his pastorate, he almost had a nervous breakdown, and this is the way he described it:

"In 19⁴⁶~~50~~, when I was called to Riverside Church, my mind was constantly preoccupied not by Riverside in 19~~46~~, but by Riverside in 1950, 1955, and 1960. And it wasn't foresight, it was fretful, fidgety apprehension. I had to give it up. I had to school myself to rise each morning and thank God for the gift of one day, a new day, with a fresh opportunity of serving Him through Riverside. I had to remind myself that God didn't expect of me anything more than industry, fidelity, dedication, on a day-by-day basis. Foresight by all means, careful planning for the future, but no fretting and fussing over something that is in His hands, not mine".

Therein is a lesson for all of us. The future would place a crippling mortgage on our lives today if we would let it. We wonder how it will be with business or profession. We worry how we can meet some problem or make some adjustment. We ask how our children will fare. We dwell upon the outcome of some crisis in our personal life or in the life of the world. And as Dr. McCracken put it: "It isn't foresight. It is fretful, fidgety apprehension."

To a person anxiously scanning the future, Jesus quietly says, "Do not be anxious about tomorrow". Worry has no driving power. It is like rust on the blade, like a break on wheels. Thank God for this day - for its blessings - for a measure of grace to face today's responsibilities. Tomorrow may not bear much resemblance to what we had either hoped or feared - but when it comes there will be grace enough and light enough and love enough for every step of the way. What Jesus was talking about in the Sermon on the Mount, Cardinal Newman was celebrating in the hymn he wrote:

"I do not ask to see the distant scene -
One step enough for me".

FINAL WORD

The third prescription is the declaration of priority that is implied in all that we have been saying, "Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, and the things that you need shall be yours as well". Or as a similar Biblical directive has it, "Cast all your anxieties on God, for he cares about you". This is the reminder that the life that is faith-full can hardly be the life that is fret-full.

On Friday evening of this week, I had a small wedding here in the chancel for a young couple. The groom was about twenty-one years of age and had just returned from eleven months in Vietnam. His father was telling me that he returned

with a decoration and also a purple heart. I talked to the young man briefly about the experience he had had been through. He told me quietly that there were a couple of times when he didn't think he every make it back and get to this occasion. I could tell he was emotionally shaken up. I asked him what was the main thing that got him through those eleven months and I liked his answer. He said "I think it was my faith in God and in my country," and then looking at his bride, added, "and the thought of Christina waiting...."

A simple affirmation of faith very much in keeping with the Sermon on the Mount and the New Testament and the long march of the people of God. We are not orphans at the mercy of whatever storm and stress we encounter. We are the children of God, and as such we are granted a love and a power which is equal to any need which can arise. That does not mean that every chapter ending, either in our personal lives or in our world, will be a success story. But it does mean that we really do not have to fret and fear about the ultimate outcome of things, or about our supply of strength for the rough stretches.

There's a soliloquy recorded by Thomas A Kempis that has always meant much to me. He said he was anxious and apprehensive about the future, and he mused to himself, "OH, if only I knew I would be faithful to the last". And something within him seemed to rise up and answer him with scorn. "Look back" it cried. "Has God ever failed you in the past?" "Well, no" "Look around you. Is He overlooking you today?" And he still answered, "No". And "Don't you know that that same God who has been and who is, evidently sufficient, will be with you every step on to the end, always as gloriously sufficient for you then as now?" "I had forgotten that" the saint confessed, "And it did make my fears look so foolish".

To which so many of us will add: "Amen" and "Amen". Let us pray.

PRAYER: Eternal Father, what we have talked about, give us the grace and the courage to live. Whatever the circumstances that we face today in our lives and in the days of the week ahead, meet our trust with a measure of your peace that passes all human understanding. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen

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One a very wise teacher was talking to a group of people who, by our standards, had every reason to be anxious. They lived in a country occupied by a foreign power. They lived under the clouds of war and surrection. They paid about 40% of their meager income in taxation. They had no social security benefits or life insurance or pension programs. They had no health departments or hospitals to help in the prevention or the treatment of illness. They had no adequate protection from robbers and revolutionaries who roamed the country and threatened their travels. But to these people, beset by so many handicaps and hazards, the teacher gave a rather incredible bit of advice. He said, "Do not be anxious".

Moreover, anyone looking into the life of the teacher might observe that he too, had ample cause for concern in his own life. He had left the security of a job and the comfort of a home. He never knew exactly where the next meal or night's lodging was coming from. He had to contend with the jealousies and the frailties of the companions he had gathered. He was beginning to encounter both the resistance of people who were suspicious of change and the hostility of authorities who felt threatened. His future looked anything but calm and serene. And yet still he could say, "Do not be anxious".

At the end of the discourse in which Jesus spoke these words, it is noted that the people were astonished, "for he spoke as one having authority". Evidently the disciples felt that way, too. For they preserved his words, not as the far-out talk of some dreamer, but as the sound guidance of one whose words were simply the reflection of the way in which he lived - and came to lead others to life.

DEVELOPMENT

Nowhere does the Sermon on the Mount deal more directly with our contemporary situation than when it deals with anxiety. And before we probe what Jesus said in this connection, ponder for a moment what he did not say. He never promised his followers an untroubled life. Indeed, it was just the opposite - "In this world you shall have tribulation". And in case we do not hear, we must surely see. For where did his way of life get him, but a cross? And where did his way of life get his disciples - and Paul - and John Wesley - and William Booth - and Dietterich Bonhoeffer - and Martin Luther King? Talk about trouble. These men did not escape it because they were Christians. They encountered it because they followed Christ.

So it was not the untroubled life that Jesus offered. Rather it was the untroubled mind. Even that doesn't imply freedom from sorrow or tension or fear. They are all part of the human condition, and all have their saving ministries to perform. Halford Luccock used to say that the best example of the right use of tension is in the mainspring of a watch. You've got to have it if a watch is active and accurate. So you need a measure of it in a life that is alert and responsible....But the untroubled mind is a characteristic state of confidence and poise and peace - as opposed to a chronic state of anxiety and fussing and fretting. "Do not be anxious" so Jesus spoke - so he lived - and his words still have authority.

MIXED UP GOALS

Now consider some of the things that he said about anxiety by way of diagnosis and prescription. For all of the times that I have read - and indeed preached - on this passage with the recurring theme, "Do not be anxious" I had never stopped to ponder the first word of this passage, wh

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"In 1946, when I was called to Riverside Church, my mind was constantly preoccupied not by Riverside in 1946 but by Riverside in 1950, 1955, 1960. And it wasn't foresight, it was fretful, fidgety apprehension. I had to give it up. I had to school myself to rise each morning and thank God for the gift of one day, a new day, with a fresh opportunity of serving Him through serving Riverside. I had to remind myself that God didn't expect of me anything more than industry, fidelity, dedication, on a day-by-day basis. Foresight by all means, careful planning for the future, but no fretting and fussing over something that is in His hands, not mine".

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THE THIRD PRESCRIPTION

The third prescription is the declaration of priority that is implied in all that we have been saying, "Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, and the things that you need shall be yours as well." Or as a similar New Testament directive has it, "Cast all your anxieties on God, for he cares about you". This is the reminder that the life that is faith-full can hardly be the life that is fret-full.

The sermon that I am trying to preach appeared in a much more telling, authoritative fashion in a clipping that I clipped from a paper last spring. It was the account of the testimony of a 20 year old sailor from the Pueblo. Listen:

"Storekeeper 3rd Class Ramon Rosales....spoke with a gentle smile during 40 poetically dramatic minutes of testimony..."

(He said) 'We had lectures with a guy we called 'Specs' on decaying American democracy and religion. He'd always get mad at me. He'd always say there was no God and I would stand up and tell Him there was a God. He asked me if I saw Him. I told him I saw Him every day in the flowers and trees. I told him that God was life. He got kind of shook up...'" The admiral questioning the sailor about his captivity, asked, 'What do you think was the main thing that got you through the 11 months?' Storekeeper Rosales smiled, 'I think it was my faith in God and my country and the decisions of my commanding officer"

In that testimony is a simple affirmation of faith that is very much in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount and the New Testament and the long march of the people of God....We are not orphans at the mercy of whatever storm and stress we encounter. We are the children of God, and as such we are granted a love and a power which is equal to any need which can arise. That does not mean that every chapter ending, either in our personal lives or in our world, will be a success story. But it does mean that we really do not have to fret and fear about the ultimate outcome of things, or about our own supply of strength for the rough stretches.

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PRAYER: Eternal Father, what we have talked about, give us the grace and the courage to live. Whatever the circumstances that we face today and tomorrow meet our trust with a measure of your peace that passes understanding. Amen