

Life Assurance: Do Not Worry About Tomorrow - 4th September 2022

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 September 2022

Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] It's good to finally be back together again after a somewhat bitty summer of Sundays, maybe. Although, in amongst the disruption and so on, there have been plenty of good times in the mix.

So not least the Play in the Park events, which were packed out with appreciative people and us flipping more burgers than ever this year. And thanks very much indeed for all who worked so hard and were involved to be putting those days on, whether in the park with the food and the kids' stuff and dropping in here as well.

We had a lovely church walk around Chasewater a couple of weeks ago, something which it might be nice to perhaps bring in on a semi-regular basis. We'll see. And thanks to your generosity, we've got some brand spanking new doors and windows of glazing to do our gazing out of.

Still some scaffolding. There's one tiny window left to finish off. That's the little one to do in the front door. But very grateful for those and keeping our building fit for the future. As well.

And I know various folks have enjoyed holidays and days out and meeting up with friends and family. Perhaps one of your highlights is watching the victorious Lionesses. Or the Commonwealth Games, which left us all feeling pretty bullish about Birmingham as well.

[1 : 17] And yet, as summer starts to subside, though, when autumn comes in, I know many of us are ready to perhaps reclaim a bit of rhythm to our weeks, and perhaps especially at our Sundays after, as I say, a bit of a disjointed summer.

And as part of this, the good news is we're ready to roll out a new Sunday series for the next couple of months, which we'll be doing. A series which we're going to be calling Life Assurance.

It's not a financial policy, but rather a series in which we'll be exploring what it means to live a life of faith in the midst of fear and uncertainty.

And I guess I don't want to put a damper on things too much this morning. And I wish things were kind of different. But there's no escape in the fact, is there, that fear currently seems to be dominating and defining so much of our shared experience of life.

So in a global sense, it's pretty obvious because it's staring us in the face. The climate crisis is becoming all too clear, whether that's illustrated by these horrific floods in Pakistan of late, or our own record-breaking heatwaves and droughts this summer.

[2 : 28] We're living in a world of such extremes, and the fallout which accompanies that future is a pretty depressing, even frightening prospect for the next generations to come, if not our own.

There's Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, where quite apart from widespread death and destruction, Russia's actions continue to disrupt food and energy supplies, leaving much of the world either crucially short or paying well over the odds for what's needed.

There's COVID as well, which continues to cause concern. We have a new variance. We're wondering might take hold this winter. And then, of course, all these factors and more are contributing to the biggie, perhaps, for us in our shores at this time.

The cost of living crisis, the cost of living catastrophe, as money-saving expert Martin Lewis labelled it this week. And he's not known for exaggeration. When he says it's a catastrophe, we do well to sit up and take notice.

Indeed, rocketing inflation, and in particular, the eye-watering utility bills rises, means that millions of households, businesses, schools, charities, churches are unable even to cover their most basic of costs, with, frankly, unthinkable prospects to come as winter approaches and prices seem inevitably going to rise again.

[3 : 51] I guess, for me, in a country where it seems price-rigged profits for the few are crushing the coping capacity of the many, in a country where inequality is amongst the very worst in the whole of Europe, I think we're the most unequal nation other than Bulgaria in the whole of Europe, in a country where our government, in a country where our government, by any sane standard, is at best incompetent and, at worst, unspeakably corrupt.

It's little wonder that worry, that fear, that despair are becoming the dominant facts of life for so very many people.

And I include myself and my family in that, in these times. And I'm going to keep it fairly brief this morning because I want to devote enough time for communion.

And I'm going to watch what I say a little bit because we're trying to protect our kids from some of this reality. And I know we're far from alone in this. But as Gemma and I go through our budget and work out what's coming in and what's going out, I don't know about you, but it's pretty scary what's coming up.

And it's scary because what I see is not just our own situations, but the situations of so many of us, the millions of people like us, for whom the systems and the structures with which we're trying to live seem to be on the brink of breaking.

[5 : 22] Indeed, they seem so fundamentally at risk, so fundamentally unequal, that unless something radical is done by the state to support those in need in the coming weeks and months, I don't really know what kind of society we'll be greeting as the new year approaches.

That's the reality. It's a dampener, it's a downer, I know. But I didn't want to start with a kind of everything's rosy kind of week back when we know millions are carrying the stresses and the worries and the fears which come with that.

And yet for us as people of faith, where might God be at work in helping us to face this fear and to cope with this crisis, this cost of living crisis millions are facing?

Well, our Bible reading for today, and it's one which will underpin much of this life assurance series we're doing. It's a relatively famous one, and it's taken from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 6, in which Jesus says this.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear.

[6 : 40] Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air. They do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you, by worrying, add a single hour to your life?

Thank you. And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow.

They do not labour or spin, yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, you of little faith?

So do not worry, saying, What shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or what shall we wear? For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.

[8 : 02] But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.

Each day has enough trouble of its own. For our friends from Hong Kong who have recently joined us, here's the same gospel reading, but in Cantonese.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. So I will tell you, Can all those who desire and ask us to rest, and see their only earning discount objects?

Why corks will this ■L carga% of students zdominarias ger Pilot? And as shown 27 heads, that may be operated, that may be appreciated.

And the result, that that where we wish the promised for us the average price of unjust laws These people are unpro■■ All the trees hear from which ■■....

[9 : 48] As Lord, who is here?■■odes of juried If you missed this form , not to be delayed Let's feed us what are we going to do.

Just how I look while then you must pursue all things Now, whether we translate that passage into English or Cantonese, when Jesus says, don't worry about tomorrow, I'm aware that in light of what I've just been saying, in light of where we're at in many ways as a country, in light of this very real cost of living crisis which so many folks are facing, it might on the surface at least feel pretty naive

of Jesus to say that we shouldn't worry about tomorrow, about what food we might eat. In fact, there's a risk that on hearing these words of Jesus, we might conclude that he's just got his head in the clouds, that he just doesn't get it, that his seemingly idealized version of faith is irrelevant to the everyday pressures that we're now facing.

And yet, knowing what we do about Jesus and knowing what we do about the times in which he lived, it's pretty clear Jesus understood poverty, he understood need, he understood crisis as well as anybody.

He lived in a Roman-occupied land where taxes were up to 90% of people's incomes and they were demanded on pain of imprisonment or death.

[11 : 52] He lived in a land where failed crops and famines which followed were a regular occurrence. He lived in a land where disease meant destitution, there was no welfare state.

He lived in a land where one in three children died at birth and the average adult life expectancy was no more than 40. You know, Jesus lived in a land which in many ways is far tougher than our land today.

So it'd be pretty daft, I guess even offensive perhaps, to think that Jesus doesn't understand whatever difficulties we might be facing, however hard they may be.

Instead, it seems the whole point of Jesus coming to be God with us is just that, is that God is with us in every level of experience, in every level of understanding.

And so far from these words of Jesus being a vacuous, kind of fingers crossed, kind of optimism, I suggest they actually go to the heart of how we might keep our faith in the face of fear.

[13 : 02] Now there's lots in this passage, but as I say, I don't want to hang on too much today. So with communion in mind though, I just want to focus on two brief aspects of what Jesus shared in that passage there.

I think firstly for this morning, it's worth noting that in the original Greek that this passage was written in, the word we translate as worry is this word, merimnau.

We've had English, we've had Cantonese, you've had some Greek this morning, you want to say merimnau after me, one, two, three, merimnau. Beautiful, multilingual today. Now this word, it literally means to be divided.

It's the idea that worry kind of pulls our mind in different directions so much that we feel split or torn. Worry that leaves us with a divided mind, if you like.

And yet what's interesting here is that Jesus, he focuses on this division, not in a this or that kind of side by side way, you've got a decision to make here and now, but he focuses on worry in a present future kind of sense.

[14 : 15] What do I mean by this? Well, it's important to note, I think, that Jesus doesn't deny that we'll have very real worries in the present, you know, concerns about today, the decisions we'll face, the difficulties we might encounter.

He admits, each day has enough troubles of its own. And he doesn't deny there will be troubles day by day. Instead, though, what Jesus, it seems, challenges here is the worry which comes from getting ahead of ourselves, from being split or torn, not in the moment, but between today and tomorrow.

Today's worries, yeah, says Jesus, they're going to be there. There's going to be enough of those. Tomorrow's worries, leave those as best we can in the future.

And I say as best we can because if we struggle with that practice of letting tomorrow worry about itself, as I know I do and as I know my sleepless nights will testify to, then that might be a good thing to be praying about.

You know, God, help me to do what you're telling me to do. Help me to put tomorrow aside for now so that I can focus with you on today.

[15 : 33] That's a good prayer to pray. Now, how might God answer that prayer? Well, multiple ways, but Jesus, in this little passage, he tells us to focus on the goodness in the present world around us today.

Not to deny there's troubles, but to make sure we spend time focusing on the good stuff, which is always there if we look hard enough for it. Look at the flowers of the field, he says. Look at the birds of the air.

And the word he uses for look is like intently look, examine, really study them. If you like, be honing in on them, blinkered on the good stuff that you can see.

Try to notice pleasure in the present, almost in order to give your mind a break from the worry about the future. It's a bit like, I guess, the psalmist who says, or tells us, lift your eyes to the hills.

Because in doing so, we take our eyes out of our own navel a bit, if you like, and we lift our eyes above what the present troubles might be to know that actually there's a bigger picture there, that help does indeed come from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

[16:43] And yet it's also worth noting that in the midst of the present, Jesus isn't denying the need for us to plan ahead for tomorrow and so on. Now in his parables and elsewhere, wise planning and as good stewardship as we can manage are qualities Jesus recognizes and values.

But making plans for the future and worrying about the future seem to be two quite different things. Yes, we prepare as best we can, but let tomorrow worry about itself because it seems there's nothing to be gained from allowing tomorrow's worries to piling on today's worries.

That's the first point and it needs prayer because it's not easy. But there's no denying that today has its own worries but Jesus encourages, even tells us for our own good to leave tomorrow's worries till tomorrow.

But then secondly, and this is I think particularly relevant to our cost of living crisis, even if we plan ahead whilst leaving tomorrow's worries until tomorrow, how might we know God's provision in meeting the very real needs we have day by day?

Well, I think the clue comes in the fact that Jesus doesn't intend for us to handle our worries in isolation. Now, if you recall, he says this, do not worry saying, what shall we eat?

[18:15] What shall we wear? But if we word it like this, do not worry saying, what shall we eat?

What shall we wear? It has a different kind of understanding because it seems that the whole point of this life, indeed the whole reason why Jesus delivers these words in a sermon not to an individual but to the crowds is that they're designed to be heard and applied in community.

Kingdom of God is a shared way of life, a common way of life as we work out with God in partnership with him and each other how to do this life God's given us.

And so if anyone's hungry today, well, Jesus' assumption is that they will receive the food they need because that's what neighbours do for those in need.

When we pray, as we will later, give us today our daily bread. We're praying that on behalf of ourselves, yeah, but the us says we're praying now on behalf of everyone else as well.

And if we have bread to spare, well, we have the privilege of becoming the answer to the very prayer we're praying because we get to give bread to those in need. But I think broader than simply our immediate community and our immediate neighbours, I'd say the onus on provision certainly certainly at this stage in our country's life has also to fall on the state, on our government.

[19:50] You know, we call them ministers. Ministers means someone who serves. And our government have a duty of care to provide for their citizens.

So as a church, as neighbours, as a community, yes, we'll do all we can to be generous to those in need in our community and beyond. But I'd say it's also imperative that in this time of crisis, we're not afraid to hold our government to account in order that they redistribute money and resources to those who need it most.

You know, we'll see what our new Prime Minister brings this week. But our individual generosity cannot and should not allow the government to renege on their duty to ensure all people have the basics, adequate food, adequate warmth, adequate shelter.

And we'll see what the weeks and the months bring as to how we might respond to whatever help is given. You see, if we take these words of Jesus seriously, words which implore us not to worry about tomorrow but to instead trust in God's ability to provide whether through each other or through the state for our needs, then we've got a job to do.

We've got work to do in the power of God's spirit to ensure that these kingdom values which Jesus talks about are put increasingly into practice especially at this time of crisis in our own land.

[21:27] The good news however in this and there is good news in this is that we're able to do our bit from now on. We're able to begin to put that work, that prayer, that faith into practice.

We're going to do that starting in a few minutes. We're going to share in communion. Now communion is many things but it's an act of worship in solidarity with each other and in thanksgiving for God's goodness to us.

It's an act of trust, a kind of physical demonstration of trust in God to give us our daily bread. Yes we eat communion in a symbolic sense but it says we trust you God to provide for us.

But it's also an act of commitment, a commitment on our part to go out into the world with the good news of a saviour who died but who rose again to bring new life.

Knowing that God's plan for this world is for it to be a place of love and light and life and not of despair and darkness and death. We have good news and the good news has to be the answer to the cost of living crisis that we're facing.

[22 : 36] And I'm glad we're back together like this again today. It's been nice to have a little bit of time off in some ways but I've missed it as well because I'm glad we get together.

I'm glad we get to share communion today because in the midst of these tough times it's good to know it's important to know that God is with us and that God is working through us and this church this community us I know we'll be together under God with whatever the coming months bring and I for one am very grateful that I get to do this next season and beyond with you.

As we go through this life assurance series my hope is that whilst not denying the reality of what we and millions of others will face we'll also discover more profoundly perhaps the peace and the provision that ultimately comes with God's assurance assurance for this life which is after all God's gift to us.

It's my prayer that as this season unfolds that we would honour this gift of life by living alongside each other in ways which prove that God is indeed with each of us whether in times of harvest or in times of hardship.

the friendship■■■■