

Trinity 15 (2024)

Most everyone, even those who don't make much bother about religion, would say if they were on a desert island and could only have three books, the Bible would be one of these three.

The Bible is a book like no other.

It is full of great stories. More importantly, it shines light on the great mysteries of life . . . tells where we came from, what our problem as humans is, what God has done about that problem and how we can have peace with God.

It is our roadmap and compass in life.

It is an inspired and inspiring book, as well as being a best seller.

Yet, let's be honest, it has its share of perplexing passages.

If you opened it up at random and began reading, let's say in Leviticus or Ezekiel, almost certainly you would find yourself scratching your head and asking: "What is this passage saying?"

To find out, you would have to do some spadework . . . find out its historical context, discover who is being addressed and under what circumstances.

But there are other passages which are not difficult to understand, which are as plain as the nose on your face. They speak directly to your current situation.

The difficulty with these passages is not in understanding them but in putting them into practice.

Such is the nature of today's reading from Matthew's Gospel.

Its message in a nutshell is: **“Ditch worry for contentment.”**

Three times in this passage, which is part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, we hear Him say, “Don’t worry.”

This admonition gets translated in various ways. The King James Version says: “Take no thought,” The Revised Standard, “Be not anxious.” Regardless, the meaning is the same: “Don’t worry.”

I think you would agree that Jesus’ command here, as comforting as it sounds, is easier said than done. How can we not worry?

This past week’s school shooting in Winder in which four were killed didn’t help.

You may well have found yourself asking, especially if you are in my age category: **What**

has happened to the world in which I grew up?

A world in which young men regularly, at least in the South, took rifles and shotguns to school and proudly displayed them in the back window of their pickup trucks.

No one was suspicious or fearful. At lunchtime or after school, other boys and perhaps even their coach and school principal would go out and look at them.

Where has personal responsibility, morality and good sense gone?

What has happened to the American home? We need fathers and other male figures who will teach boys how to be men, real men, men who will go on to be good husbands, providers and community leader?

What will life be like in these United States – if the Lord tarries His coming – in 20, 30, 50 years from now?

What kind of future do young people coming of age in the present face?

Billy Graham, back in the early '60s saw coming what has happened, when among other things prayer was banned from public schools. He said: **“It’s either back to the Bible or back to the jungle.”**

Well, we’re in the jungle, and we’ve been there for quite some time.

Besides violence and discord in society, everyone, young and old, faces personal, work and family challenges. How can we not worry?

Before I go further, let’s be clear what Jesus is not saying in today’s passage when he say, “Don’t worry.”

He is not saying, in the midst of the malaise I have just been describing, put on a happy face and everything will be alright. That has more to do with being naive than faith.

Words of a song from the time of the First World War come to mind: **“Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag, And smile, smile, smile.”**

Putting on a happy face may help build morale in a time of war, but this alone will do little or nothing in putting away nagging, debilitating and life-destroying fear.

Nor is Jesus forbidding prudent planning. There are things about which we need to be concerned and contingencies for which we need to make provision.

It is not wrong, for example, to have a strategy for an ‘active shooter’ event.

Nor is there anything faithless about putting up food in the summertime so you will have something to eat in winter. Squirrels do it. We should follow their lead.

Still less is Jesus advocating a total disregard for appropriate dress.

I once saw a cartoon of a female minister in a pulpit wearing a bathrobe and bedroom slippers, with a towel around her head.

The caption underneath had her announcing her sermon text: **“Take no thought what ye shall put on.”**

Prudent planning and dressing appropriately need to be encouraged and not discouraged.

What then is Jesus forbidding when he says “Take no thought” for this that or the other?

In context, it is those things the Prayer Book calls “faithless fears and worldly anxieties”, the gnawing and debilitating *what-ifs* of life. The key word is *faithless*.

Remember the story in Matthew’s Gospel of Jesus walking on the water. Here we are given a picture of how we are to face life.

The disciples are alone in a boat in the midst of a storm on the Sea of Galilee.

Then they look out and see Jesus walking on the water. At first, they think He is a ghost. Peter cries out and asks if he can come to Him.

Jesus says come and Peter gets out of the boat. He does alright so long as he keeps his eyes focused on Jesus. But, when he takes them off and looks down at the angry waves lapping at his feet, he succumbs to fear, and what happens? /// He begins to sink.

That is what happens when we take our eyes off Jesus and let faithless fears and worldly anxieties take over. We begin to sink.

In today's passage, Jesus says worry is senseless, futile and faithless. His argument goes something like this:

The life you and I possess did not come about through our own choice or design. It was God who gave us life. This being the case: Can we not trust God to provide those things needful for life?

To further punctuate this thought, He points us to the book of nature, first to the birds of the air. If God provides for their needs, He will certainly provide for ours. Notice he speaks of *your* heavenly Father feeding them. He is their creator. He is our Father . . . a distinction worth noting.

And then He points us to the flowers of the field. They don't stress over clothing. Yet their apparel surpasses that of kings.

Both the birds of the air and the flowers of the field teach us to leave worry to God.

But, let me pause here and throw in an objection. Some will surely say:

But what about good people, many who are Christians, who don't have enough to eat or proper clothing? What are we to make of their lack in the light of these verses?

I think we have to say that God can and does at times provides directly and miraculously for their needs. I remember hearing a German refugee tell about something that happened to him as a small boy at the end of the Second World War.

He and many others were fleeing the zone being taken over by the Red army, trying to get to the area occupied by the Americans. It was bitterly cold, and his feet were frost-bitten. He cried out for help. Then, looking down, he saw a pair of shoes on the path in front of him.

Okay such things happen . . . but more often than not, God calls on people like you and me to be workers together with Him in this operation of providing for the needs of others.

This past week I heard a man tell how one Christmas when he was a boy his family found themselves in greatly reduced circumstances. His father had lost his job, and there was almost no food in the larder.

A few days before Christmas, his father, his face full of worry, called the family together and explained that their holiday dinner was going to be meager. But even as he spoke, there came a knock at the door.

Outside were people from their church who had heard about their predicament and had brought a huge basket of food. So, instead of having an empty table, they had an overflowing one. The man went on to say that it was their best Christmas ever.

God provided, but He did so through people like you and me. So, keep your eyes and ears open. When God calls, respond with a glad heart and willing hands.

In closing, even in the most tumultuous times, with God as our Father, with our eyes fixed on Jesus, ditching worry for contentment is possible. You are not alone. Power is available.

What's weighing on your mind and heart this morning?

Whatever it is, lay it down. Let go and let God.

