

St John's Carrington

Some years ago I took the very wise and helpful decision to go into therapy. It was to be a journey that took place over a period of 2 1/2 years and was a liberating and healing experience. One of my most poignant memories of it took place in the introductory session. Having poured out my distress and near the end of the session the therapist then said to me

"I want you to agree that you will not take action that will harm others, or hurt yourself or make yourself ill".

I remember feeling perturbed and aggrieved and thinking to myself who does she think she is? I've never mentioned anything like that at all.

However on my journey, I learned that when we are under stress we can go to a place of illness or lurch out an offence against other people as a way of deflecting from our pain.

In the Gospel reading today in John 14, Jesus tells the disciples, 'do not let your hearts be troubled'.

We often assume that worry is an uncontrollable consequence on our emotions to events. But my therapist and Jesus have different ideas.

They are both in agreement that to a greater degree, that letting our hearts be troubled, or as we would describe it, **worry** is something we can make a decision about. When Jesus says, 'do not let your hearts be troubled', in the context of this scripture he is saying, 'make a conscious decision that your hearts are not troubled'.

The conversation that follows between Jesus and his disciples comes immediately after he tells the disciples that one of them will betray him and one of them will deny him. Also, ahead of them will be great trouble.

Of course they are worried. He is about to confront the authorities and from within their inner eye it doesn't look good - for any of them. Why would their hearts not be troubled.

The disciples had spent three years with Jesus. They had heard his teachings both to large crowds and in the intimacy of their small-group.

They had seen him heal the sick, put down religious authorities by revealing the nature of God's love for humanity. They had seen his control over nature and they had seen him cast out Demons.

They had heard him talk about the intimate relationship between him and his Father. Yet after all this it would seem they had their questions and doubts.

5 Thomas said to him, **“Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”**

Then Philip looks for further reassurance, **8** “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” In other words, Show us God.

To which Jesus answers, **9** “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time?” A question we can hear him ask with maybe incredulity, or exasperation or understanding.

How can it be that these bright, educated, intelligent and worldly wise men who after walking through the dust with Jesus, sharing multiple tables, travelling tightly in boats could doubt who he is? This is the man who turned water into wine, raised a dead man to life and calmed a storm?

And in response to their doubts Jesus is kind. He tries to comfort and reassure them.

In relation to death he says, where I am going there is plenty of room for everyone and I will prepare a place for you. I am the way the truth and the life. If you know me you know my Father.

This text speaks directly into our time. For we are living in days of great uncertainty as we look for comfort and reassurance. We are having to learn to live with an infection which in Christian theology is an expression of our brokenness because as far as is known, in some way or other we are responsible for creating COVID-19 through our own carelessness.

As a consequence we live knowing that people who are loved have died because of the virus. People who thus far have worked in professions that have been grossly undervalued are now the same people who despite poor working conditions and being underpaid risk their own loss of life for the sake of others.

We live with financial uncertainty and whether the business that has been so invested in will be sustainable.

Some carers live in situations where they are caring for a child with special needs or a partner who has dementia and are exhausted and lonely.

Yet, into these circumstances Jesus says, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled'. To which we respond,

TROUBLED! YOU DON'T KNOW THE HALF OF IT MATE!

In the same way that Jesus refers to worry as having an element of choice in it, the **consequences** we see of the virus are not just haphazard. They are preceded by choices we have made.

If we, as a community had made different decisions about how we order our society, the life experience of what we are living through now would be different.

Medical and care staff and front line workers would have enough PPE. There would be better support infrastructure for stay at home carers. There would not be the need for the pouring out of huge amounts of money into homelessness.

Another consequence of when we worry is that it acts like a lens that is clouded over. We cannot see through the lens at the world as it is. Instead we can only focus on our internal frame of reference.

Worry is essentially a set of feelings which often are incongruent to the reality of what is happening in the world. How often have you worried about something ahead of you,

only to find that when it happened it was nothing to worry about?

Worry does have its place. It is an emotional reaction to an event but the point is that it is a trigger that should prompt us to action. What parent, when realising they have lost their child in the department store simply sits on the floor with their head in their hands. No, they spring into action, doing what is necessary to find their child. And when they find their child, they have no need to worry any longer.

So how are you coping with lock down? Friends of mine who are introverts are loving it. I hate it. I just want life to get back to how it was, which of course it won't be, at least for a while to come.

In our church community last week, **using a now well-known audio-visual digital platform** we met after worship and our discussion turned to how we are coping with lock-down. Someone spoke eloquently about the importance of gratitude and the positive impact it has on our wellbeing.

Gratitude is the quality within us of being thankful, of being ready to show appreciation for and to return kindness. It's a quality we can cultivate, a quality we can choose to focus on in the same way we can choose to focus on worry.

The problem with focusing on worry is that it magnifies in our heads. As one commentator put it, our thoughts become like monkeys jumping around in a tree.

I should be doing this

I'm not good enough

She's better than me.

I'm not beautiful

I can't do it.

I've let them down

I'm afraid.

..and the thoughts go on and on. We can't sleep. We can't eat.

We have to take medication.

But practicing gratitude, saying thank you and showing genuine heart-felt appreciation has a different affect.

Practicing gratitude reduces anxiety and feelings of apprehension including reduced anxiety about dying.

Practicing gratitude is good for our mental health.

This includes giving gratitude to God. Studies have indicated that people who feel more grateful to God, are healthier and are resilient to stress in life.

So how do we do gratitude? Write a letter, make a phone call, send a card, tell them how much you appreciate them and

thank them for what they mean in your life. Write a gratitude journal. In the moment pause, breathe and appreciate.

Practicing gratitude doesn't mean that we will be ever happy and delighted. Gratitude asks us to accept reality for what it is and focus on how to reduce worry. We don't expect miracles when we write a gratitude journal; we just get a closer view of the right things that still exist in life. By being more grateful in the inside and expressing it on the outside, we gain the power to combat and cope with the stress.

For the Christian of faith, Jesus is not some fanciful illusion but a person of reality that makes a practical difference in life. I am not an accountant but in my work I take my accountant at his word. If he says, we are in a good financial position, who am I to argue. For the person of Christian faith, Jesus is similar. If he is saying do not worry, who am I to argue? The challenge is, 'Do I trust him enough'.

In John 14 Jesus is saying exactly that. Do not worry, trust me. Do not worry about the future. Do not worry about death because I love you and am the way the truth and the life.