

An Address by Ash Leighton Plom at St David's Church – 20 th September 2020,  
Father of all, give us ears to hear you, minds to meet you,  
and hearts to respond to your living presence. Amen

Well, hello everybody, and welcome once again to our Harvest festival here at St David's church, Exeter. For those of you that don't yet know me, My name's Ash, and I'm a trainee vicar here in this parish. Today, I want to do just three things, looking at the scriptures we've heard just now: Firstly, I want to look at Jesus' words about worry for us this morning, and secondly I want to encourage giving thanks as a Biblical balm against worry. Then thirdly, I want to point you forward in Christian hope. So, here we go.

Some people say the phrase "do not worry" is written in the Bible 365 times - literally once for every day of the year. Now, admittedly, in practice this varies depending on the translation you use - and some will have phrases like "don't be afraid", or traditional language like "be ye not afeared", but the point stands: The Bible tells us not to worry, all through scripture.

And I'm like, "Have you looked around Lord?!"

I mean, it's pretty worrying out there.

I'm honestly quite worried, most of the time.

But that reading from Luke's gospel has it as the words of Jesus himself: "Don't worry about the food you will eat or the clothes you will wear." He says, "There is more to life than food, more to your bodies than clothes."

He uses the examples of flora and fauna, both are unworried, and yet both flourish, clothed beautifully by God's provision.

Close your eyes a sec, visualise it... imagine it... birds flying free in a blue sky: they're not burdened with worries. They just fly, carefree, free, because of God's care for them.

And picture blades of grass or wildflowers wafting in the breeze, a whole field, just waving at you, looking gorgeous.

Okay, come on back... Let's think for a minute. The context for Luke 12 is that Jesus is giving this sermon of his own on greed and covetousness, and he uses a parable at the start about that rich man who was so full of himself and his success that he hadn't paused to thank God.

His eyes were on the harvest, not on the one who made the harvest grow.

So, Jesus is challenging us here, don't fix your eyes on stuff, because you can't take it with you. Jesus invites us: Don't be like that greedy, rich, doomed man, but be like the birds and the plants. Just receive from God his provision in your life. We've got to shift our thoughts from wanting and worrying to thanking and flourishing. He wants us to move from worry to worship.

Now, that reminds me, of another excellent scripture: Philippians 4:6-7, where St. Paul says, don't worry about a thing, but in every situation, by prayer, with thanksgiving, present your needs to God. And he says this prayerful thankfulness will fill your hearts with peace in Christ.

This brings me to my second point: thankfulness as a balm for fear. Now, like I said, I confess, I myself am a worrier. And even if you don't tend to worry, you can probably acknowledge that the times we're living through right now are worrying... For me, it's the uncertainty. I've got too much pencil in my diary and not enough ink: we make plans, but have to be ready to change them or cancel them, in case there's a spike, or government guidelines change, or we have a local lockdown or the like, and everything just feels very uncertain, unstable, and insecure. And this constant uncertainty, this lack of control, is attritional. I find it's wearing me down.

But Jesus reminds us, in the reading today, "no one can add even an hour to their life

by worrying". You can't live longer by worrying. However, you probably can live longer by acceptance: accepting that there's only so much you can control, and ultimately we're all, really quite powerless - like the man in Jesus' parable. That man thought he had control over his future, his harvest, but he didn't have control over the fact that he was going to die that very night, through some cause beyond his control...

And, on the other hand, God in his abundant goodness, lavishes generosity on the birds, even on the grass and flowers, and I want to say to you today: he takes an even greater pride in you. I guarantee you, there is no detail of your life that is beneath God's notice. And he wants to lavish his love on you.

So: he calls us to be people who are steeped in his providence, his presence, so that we can rejoice that He, the creator and sustainer of the universe calls us his friends, and abides with us in our lives. To activate this shift, then, in our thinking and our feeling, I want to suggest to you that giving thanks kills fear. Because fear is about fixation on what you lack, thanksgiving is about noticing what you have. If we open our eyes and see, God provides in every situation, if we have eyes to see it, hearts to receive it. Do you know how much it costs to give patients oxygen in the hospital? And yet God blesses us with an abundance of the stuff every day for free. If we relearn how to see life, we can replace fear with thanks. So Jesus says, Godless people run after things, like the doomed man in our parable, because they think they have to obtain them all by themselves. But the God is saying: be like the birds and the plants, who receive from God, who provides. One of my favourite sayings, from a very wise master is: "Your focus determines your reality." I see this in myself all the time: if I let my focus cast around undisciplined, I worry. But if I keep my focus, mindful of what God has done for me, my entire reality can shift from worry to worship.

And this, really, is my final point. This is the Gospel. If we take our eyes off the things we lack and think about the things God has given us, we can move from fear to thanks, worry to worship. As Christians, we believe there is a good creator God, who made us, and has a good purpose for us.

The incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ show to us that he has not abandoned creation, even though we've made a mess of it. No, he came from heaven to earth - imagine that - from heaven to this worrying quagmire of anxiety, sickness and death we call earth, and he blessed it with his very presence and said it's good. And he loves us and values us so much that he died, even on a cross, to make a way for you to get from earth to heaven.

He took into himself everything which could cause us worry, all the brokenness of the world, all the bad things we do to each other, he took them into himself and paid the price, so that he could reap a harvest of redeemed men and women and children, whose eyes need not be on the stuff of this world, but on the sure and certain hope our redeemer has given us.

God cares for you. He provides the very breath in your lungs, for free, he died so you don't have to, and he is risen and ascended to prove it. He is with you by his Spirit right now, especially as we come to him in Sunday worship.

So... let's keep giving thanks, by sensing his presence, and let's keep sharing the hope that we have in him, with those around us, and those we meet, so that we ourselves might be messengers in these times of worry, speaking thankfulness against fear, and hope in our Lord for our eternal futures. Amen