

27 February 2011 – Epiphany 8A
Isaiah 49:8-16a, Matthew 6:24-34

“Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothes?”¹

Yes! we say this week.

Yes, we know that is so true – as we face such destruction, such loss of life, we know how precious life is. Life is so much more than food or drink, the body so much more than clothes.

And yet – don't worry??

What about those who have been left with nothing more than the clothes they stand up in, with their possessions buried or ruined, or people who have to queue for water and sometimes for food?

Surely in their situation they have reason to worry, to be anxious for their present and their future.

Is it good news to say to them, “Don't worry”?

But maybe this week of all weeks we can hear the truth of Jesus' words.

Worry is the central concern in the verses we listened to from Matthew.

Do not worry about your life

Can you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

Therefore, do not worry

Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.

To the extent that we ultimately rely on our own resources and not on God's graceful care, we will be plagued by worry. Worrying about life and food and drink and clothes is one way we keep control of our life in our own hands, making our priority the things we need and how we will get them, believing (whether we admit it or not) that being able to acquire food and drink and clothes will also bring us life, a good life, and security and control and independence

But in the end our lives cannot be totally under our control. We cannot make our lives completely safe and secure, protected from anything that may threaten us – or that threaten our families, those we love and the places and things we cherish.

In the end we live in a world that is capable of stripping us of everything that we acquire in order to protect ourselves. “Future-proofing” is of limited use – there are times when the future will overwhelm us and shake us to the core and strip us of all that we have.

What can we ultimately rely on? “You cannot serve God and wealth” Jesus said.²

If we choose wealth as our priority, we may for a time be able to experience good times and security, but we are also vulnerable to loss and catastrophe.

If we choose God, in good times and in bad we have no reason to worry. God will provide for our needs.³

Can I say that this week, when so many in Christchurch have been left with limited access to water and food and only the clothes they stand in? Where is God's provision for their needs?

Barbara Essex says of this passage:

“Jesus is inviting people into God's realm, where priorities are clear.....In God's community people look out for each other and share what they have; people take what they need and leave some for others. In God's community, people think about their neighbours, even as they think about themselves. This is where the miracle of God's care for God's people is discovered”⁴

When I read that, I thought immediately of the outpouring of love and support and care that we have seen

1 Matthew 6:25

2 Matthew 6:24

3 Barbara Evans in *Feasting on the Word: Year A Vol.1*, p.406

4 Evans, B. in *Feasting on the Word*, p.406

flooding into Christchurch from all around the country.

I thought of the unstinting unceasing work of those involved in the rescue effort, often with no regard for their own situation and the losses they have suffered

I thought of the teams of people from all over the world who have come to give the help they are trained to give.

I thought of the students and farmers out shoveling mud and silt, and the packed lunches sent from students here in Dunedin to feed them.

I thought of the stories of neighbours getting together to share food and cooking facilities and what water they have.

Surely God has been providing what is needed, in so many ways.

Peter Beck, Dean of Christchurch cathedral, said this week,

"This [earthquake] is not an act of God - this is the earth, doing what it does. The act of God is how we love each other, how we reach out to one another"

We know that this week is extraordinary.

But, see, people who may or may not have focused previously on worrying about what to eat and what to drink and what to wear suddenly find that all these needs are met.

Do not worry – your heavenly Father knows you need all these things.⁵

But we also know that when the immediate crisis passes, when life returns to 'normal', however unlike anything previously known as 'normal' that might be, there will be plenty to worry about, plenty of concerns and urgent needs and difficult situations.

As Jesus says “Tomorrow will bring worries of its own” And “Today's trouble is enough for today”.

Jesus never suggests that there won't be worries or troubles in the present or in the future – but he assures those who follow him, those who are learning to live in the realm of God, the kingdom of heaven, that they can trust God for present and future. They don't need to focus on, to prioritise food or drink or clothes - they can make their priority righteousness, being in right relations with God and with one another, living justly and seeking peace and dealing mercifully with one another. They can be confident that they can trust God for all that they need in the present and in the future.

Jesus' words are for those who understand that God will not leave us without resources or support.

We can face life with all its uncertainties and contingencies with the assurance that we are not alone – that God sees, hears, and cares about us and our situation.

Isaiah was writing to people who felt that they had nothing to hope for. They felt forsaken, forgotten. They were no longer aware of God's presence with them.

The passage as a whole is full of what God has done for God's people -

“I have answered you, I have helped you, I have kept you, I have given you as a covenant⁶....

The Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his suffering ones.”⁷

And yet Zion has missed all this – Zion, the city of God, feels forsaken and forgotten. And at the time it probably looked like that, 70 years after the destructive invasion of the Babylonians. The walls, the city, the Temple were all in ruins. Was that not proof that God had forgotten them?

Yet God's word to lamenting Zion is “I will not forget you”.⁸ Can a mother forget the child she is nursing? Well, not for long, not for more than about 3 or 4 hours – after that your body reminds you quite powerfully that there is someone else depending on you.

God says – even if a mother can forget her nursing child, I will not forget you – see, I have inscribed you

5 Matthew 6:32

6 Isaiah 49:8

7 Isaiah 49:13

8 Isaiah 49:15b

on the palms of my hands!⁹

The image is of something like a tattoo, really, of God not just writing but carving the ones God loves, the ones God has compassion for, the ones God will not forget, on the palms of God's hands.

Just as an enthusiastic lover may get a tattoo of his sweetheart's name in a heart with flowers around it.

Does God love us that much?

Will God remember us so constantly?

In this week of all weeks God invites us to trust in God's unfailing love, in God's unforgetting compassion.

God invites us to look around and see signs of God's reign and of God's presence in unexpected places, even in the midst of tragedy and destruction.

We can refuse.

We can choose to make our own safety and prosperity our focus, our worry, trying to keep all of our life under our own control, trying to accumulate the things that we think will give us security.

Or we can choose to live as people living under God's reign, seeking right relationships with one another, making peace and showing mercy, acting justly and living compassionately.

We can look out for and rejoice in all the signs we see of God's presence, even in the darkest of times, even in the saddest of tragedies.

And we can don't have to worry, because God is with us and will not forget us.

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