

Don't worry

What are you worried about today?

I'm not asking if you are worried today, because I know you have worries – we all do. Some great, some small, some life changing, some world changing... and probably some trivial too.

I reflected at Women's Day Fellowship earlier this month, and at the Men's discussion group a couple of months ago, about the worries of our lives, and about how worries affect our lives, especially in the context of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"* (Matt 6:25,27)

And in fact, 'not worrying' is a big point in the Sermon on the Mount: *"And why do you worry about clothes?"* Jesus asks (Matt 6:28), and he tells us *"...do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'"* (Matt 6:31) and then, *"...do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."*

And yet, here we all are with all the worries of our lives.

But nestled amongst Jesus' urging for us to not worry in the Sermon on the Mount, he tells us the antidote to the worries we have. You'll know it, of course, and it gives us one of my favourite hymns, one that we've sung this morning – Matthew 6:33 *"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you..."*

We know, don't we, *"Seek ye first the kingdom of God"*, but we don't often remember the context. Instead of worrying, we should be seeking God's kingdom. Or I think we can rearrange it a bit: Don't let worries stop you from seeking God's kingdom. Don't let the worries of your life, or of the world, overwhelm you – or even simply distract you.

And that's the theme picked up in our gospel reading today: Don't be distracted. The reading is part of what's known as the Olivet Discourse – another of Jesus' sermons on a mount – but this time it's on the Mount of Olives, and rather than being near the beginning of the gospel narrative, it's near the end.

We heard that Jesus and the disciples were leaving the temple and one of the disciples remarked *"Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"* (13:1).

It was likely just a casual remark. It's like a couple of the folks from St Andrews said to me after our combined service last week – 'this is a great building'.

I agreed with the commenter about how good our facilities here are, and we had a nice conversation.

Jesus, on the other hand, responded to the unnamed disciple: “Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus. “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.” (13:2)

It’s easy to think that the Temple was something like a church or maybe a cathedral. But the temple was so much more than simply a place of worship – it was the centre of Jewish life. It was the centre of Jewish power. It was a place of regular pilgrimage. Of course, within the temple was the Holy of Holies, where the people believed that God was present.

And it was also a great building. For most people who saw it, and certainly for Jesus’ disciples from Galilee, it would have been the largest, and most impressive building that they would ever see.

And then, as they left the temple, Jesus told them it was going to be destroyed.

And then I think there was an awkward silence – a *long* awkward silence – while the group walked from the temple to the Mount of Olives (a bit under two kilometres away).

Potentially, a nice walk, had the disciples not been contemplating what Jesus had just said.

Jesus had just announced the destruction of what was the spiritual, religious, political, economic and cultural centre of the Jewish world. You can imagine the disciples thinking: What’s happening? Why is it happening? What’s going to happen next? What’s going to happen to us? They were worried.

Finally, after the walk to the Mount of Olives Peter, Andrew, James and John – the inner circle of the disciples – approached Jesus privately and asked him, “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?” (13:4)

When?

Wouldn’t it be good to know when?

But we can’t know when – Jesus says so later in this chapter, in verse 32 - *“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”* (13:32)

They couldn’t know *when*. Jesus couldn’t tell them *when*.

And his answer wasn’t to rebuke the disciples for asking; instead, Jesus began with a warning: “Watch out that no one deceives you.” (13:5) This theme of warning persists through Mark 13 – the same Greek word which is given as ‘watch out’ here, is translated as ‘be on your guard’ in verse 9 and simply ‘be on guard’ in verse 33.

Despite what the disciples had asked, Jesus didn’t warn them about being on guard for the destruction of the temple, instead, he warned them about being beware of people who might deceive them.

Jesus said that the people who will try to deceive them will claim divine authority: *“Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many.”* (13:6)

So we, like the disciples, should watch out... but how is it that we can watch out?

Well, we need to test these things against the scriptures, and that’s not just to find a verse that supports what is being said, but we need to test what we’re told against the fullness of scripture. It pays for all of us to know the bible, to read the bible and to understand what we read.

But thinking about prophecies of catastrophic events whether it’s the destruction of the temple, or ‘things to come’, or the ‘End of Days’ to use the Jewish expression, is an interesting thing for Christians. There are those who will embrace it, wholeheartedly, who will focus on end times things, perhaps to the point of obsession – looking for signs, counting down days and so on. And then there are those who skip over it.

There is a long and rich tradition of predicting the end of the world: I’ve shared before that Wikipedia maintains predicted dates of the end of the world. I checked this week, there are now 222 documented predictions that have failed.

I think the presence of such predictions reveals a human need, a human fear of the future, the biggest worry of all. When? I think we are all a bit like the disciples who came to Jesus and asked “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?” (13:4)

But rather than re-asking the disciples’ question “when will this be?”, we need to focus on how Jesus’ answered them.

We need, Jesus says, to watch out, to stay on guard, so that we are not led astray, and then he goes on to talk about various things – catastrophic things, world-shattering things – that will happen:

⁷⁷ When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁸ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains. (13:7-8)

People often take Jesus’ reference to wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes and famines as the signs that the disciples requested, when they asked “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?” People track such things, and claim them as signs of the end – you now, the man on the street corner, with the sandwich board emblazed ‘Repent! For the end is nigh’, but Jesus isn’t mentioning these things as signs of the end, he is telling the disciples – and us – of things that will happen before the end. Will continue to happen as they had throughout history. Things that we shouldn’t be deceived by and things that we shouldn’t be distracted by.

If you look at Jesus' list, there was nothing new there: wars and rumours of wars; nations rising against nations, and kingdoms against kingdoms; earthquakes in various places; famines.

It was the world of the first century AD, and it's the world around us, isn't it? We can open a newspaper (or a news website) and read about wars and rumours of war, and about nations rising against nation, and about earthquakes and famines and so many other natural disasters.

In the face of all those things, we as Christians are called to do what we can, to make peace, to feed the hungry, to cope with natural disasters. We must never ignore the things of this world and the suffering we see, but as we attend to the things of this world, to making peace, to feeding the hungry and tending the sick, we need to remember that those things are not the end in themselves, but rather the way in which we follow the example of Jesus, and serve God. To go back to the Sermon on the Mount, "Don't worry... seek first his kingdom".

Jesus said, "*These are the beginning of birth pains.*" They are the birth pains of the age to come: something that the world – and that we - must go through. Something the world must continue to go through, until the day God's plan for creation is made complete.

And of course it's easy to be distracted these birth pains. By all the worries - think about how we were in the days following the 9/11 attacks or how we all felt when the Covid-19 pandemic began.

We, as followers of Jesus need to be aware of all the distractions we face, and to keep our worries in the context of God's goodness and mercy. To remember, and hold in our hearts, the hope that we have because Jesus died for us – and rose again to restore us into relationship with God. We need to seek first his kingdom.

There is so much to worry about. There are natural disasters, military conflicts, economic crises, environmental catastrophes and on and on our concerns go. But Jesus said there will be wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁸ *Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines.*

What are you worried about today?

Don't be consumed by it, don't be distracted by it.

Whatever it is, we can remain assured that Jesus, in his death and resurrection, has done all that is needed to save us. We just need to keep our faith in him, and be confident in the face of people and events that would lead us astray - whether they do so intentionally or not.

We must remember in the face of all our worries, and all the problems of the world and our lives, that God has a plan for creation – and a plan for us; there is an end in which God will make all things new, when every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and our worries will be washed away by his love.

Amen.