

## Coping with Anxiety

17<sup>th</sup> February 2012

We are focusing on coping with anxiety this morning. I am anxious about speaking to you this morning. However many times I teach, speak or preach, I am anxious. I am anxious about whether you are listening and what you think about what I am saying. I am more anxious about what God thinks. Every time I drive I am anxious. I am anxious about all sorts of things at home and work, with my health and family. I worry a lot less than I used to but anxiety does still stop me doing! Beryl Pfizer wrote: If I spent as much time doing the things I worry about getting done as I do worrying about them, I wouldn't have anything to worry about. Similarly Walter Kelly commented: when I don't have anything to worry about, I begin to worry about that.

We can all be anxious, some more than others, but it is an extremely counter-productive thing to do. Worry has been likened to a rocking chair. It will give you something to do, but it won't get you anywhere. It was Corrie Ten Boom, the Dutch Christian writer imprisoned in a concentration camp during WW2 for protecting Jews, who said: Worry doesn't empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength. Anxiety is distress about future uncertainties characterised by many different feelings, thoughts and physical symptoms such as a feeling of panic or tension, the difficulty of concentrating, the feeling of going crazy or of "jelly" legs or trembling hands, of fainting, feeling alone, of a racing heart or fast breathing rate, terrible headaches, hot flushes, butterflies feeling, numbness in the fingers or toes and the lump in the throat, among many others. Primarily it has to do with what may happen in the future. We feel vulnerable and unprotected against threats. Emotionally, these cause us anxiety whether imagined or real.

I am sure you remember when you were anxious yesterday and why? And last week! During last year! I am sure we can list our anxieties about tomorrow, next week, the year to come and even beyond. We are anxious about many things and most times it is the things that are out of our control. We can control the amount of work that goes into a project but we can't control the project's success. We can start a journey, we can't control if an accident will end the journey at any point. We can ask people to do things for us but we cannot control if they will do them or how well. We can express our love for someone but we cannot control if they will love us back. We can try to keep a secret but we cannot control if the secret gets out. Think, how anxious are you? Why?

All this reminds me of the parable about a boat which docked in a tiny Costa Rican village. An American tourist complimented the Costa Rican fisherman on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took him to catch them.

"Not very long," answered the Costa Rican. "But then, why didn't you stay out longer and catch more?" asked the American. The Costa Rican explained that his small catch was sufficient to meet his needs and those of his family. The American asked, "But what do you do with the rest of your time?"

"I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, and take a siesta with my wife. In the

evenings, I go into the village to see my friends, have a few drinks, play the guitar, and sing a few songs...I have a full life."

The American interrupted, "I have an MBA from Yale University and I can help you! You should start by fishing longer every day. You can then sell the extra fish you catch. With the extra revenue, you can buy a bigger boat. With the extra money the larger boat will bring, you can buy a second one and a third one and so on until you have an entire fleet of trawlers. Instead of selling your fish to a middle-man, you can negotiate directly with the processing plants and maybe even open your own plant. You can then leave this little village and move to San Jose, Los Angeles, or even New York City! From there you can direct your huge enterprise."

"How long would that take?" asked the Costa Rican. "Twenty, perhaps twenty-five years," replied the American. "And after that?" "Afterwards? That's when it gets really interesting," answered the American. "When your business gets really big, you can start selling stocks and make millions!" "Millions? Really? And after that?"

"After that you'll be able to retire, live in a tiny village near the coast, sleep late, play with your children, catch a few fish, take a siesta with your wife, and spend your evenings drinking, playing the guitar and enjoying your friends!" Funny that!

Although anxiety can be a very healthy God given emotion it is often a problem. It has been estimated that 40% of our worries are about things that never happen, 30% concern things in the past that cannot be changed, 12% are health worries that are needless and 10% are trivial matters that aren't worth it. That leaves 8% of our 'anxiety time' for legitimate concerns. It is the 92% that is counterproductive. Corrie Ten Boom, the Christian writer imprisoned in a concentration camp for help Jews escape was clear in her thoughts, about worry, saying that it is utterly useless, serving no good purpose, and that God meant things to be perfect; they become imperfect because of it.

But we do need to cope with it. Our Christian approach is not to worry. Easier said than done! As Christians, we may feel insecure, but, in truth, we are very secure, knowing that we have complete trust in God. God promised his peace to those who lay their anxieties in front of Him – not a solution and certainly not an answer to all our prayers! Some things will not change and we have to accept that but being relaxed and content enough to know what we are capable of, focusing on what we can do and not on what we cannot do, being flexible, adaptable, adjustable and open to possible change is the Christian way.

*Listen to:   Philippians 4:4-9*

Paul believes rejoicing is so important that he says it twice in the same sentence. Not "be happy all the time," but rejoice in the Lord. Regardless of our anxieties celebrating God's love puts anxieties into perspective. It takes the focus off them and puts it on God. It doesn't matter what we do to celebrate God's goodness and love - sing in the shower or anywhere else, listen to music, read a psalm quietly or shout it from the rooftops, praise and worship in church or in the fields, dance around the lounge or garden, meditate, pray - we need to do something. That is what Paul tells us to do.

And Paul emphasizes gentleness, not only with those around us, but also with ourselves and with our plans. We can get anxious when there are uncontrolled variables in our plans for life, for our work, for our family, for the weekend, for the next five minutes. We need to be gentle. And Paul says that in being thankful to God we must think on all those things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable, everything that is excellent and praiseworthy. No negatives: not the false, wrong, twisted, ugly and evil, but the positive. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

*Listen to some thoughts about anxiety from the New Testament:*

*James 4:13-15*

*1 Peter 5:6 - 7*

*Matthew 6: 27 and 31 - 34*

*Luke 12 54-56*

Jesus did just that. He lived for every precious moment and was not best pleased when people kept thinking of the future. He must have felt anxious when he spoke to large crowds, when he realized the disciples doubted him, misunderstood him, ignored him, or failed him. He must have felt anxiety when he socialized with sinners and outcasts, when he healed people, when he cast the sellers out of the Temple. We know that Jesus often took pity on the crowds following him around because they were, in his words, “worried and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus in Gethsemane was our model, gathering his close friends around him, and pouring out his anxieties on God. Even with The Cross approaching Jesus treasured every difficult moment, using time for loving, helping, sharing and forgiving. Being positive is a wonderful way to cope with anxiety.

I saw, on a Yorkshire church billboard, in huge letters in the car park, two weekends ago: ‘This is the day the Lord has made: Do not mess it up.’ We mess it up if anxiety and worry stop us doing. Faith should not be a last resort, to try when our anxieties become too much. It is too late then. Faith is a way of life that puts our anxieties and worries into perspective. Rejoice and celebrate, be gentle with others and ourselves, be thankful, think positive thoughts and live for every moment of today, not tomorrow. Jesus’ resurrection is not only our eternal future. It is our present daily reality too.

**Peter Smith**