

Epiphany 8 (Matthew 6:25-34)

A sermon by Tom Frame (26/02/17)

One morning Death was walking into a city when a man stopped him and asked what he was doing. Death answered, "I'm going into the city to take 10,000 people." The man replied, "That's terrible that you would take 10,000 people." Death responded, "Taking people when their time has come is my job. Today I have to get my 10,000." Later, as Death was coming out of the city, the man met him. Again, he was furious. He said, "You told me this morning that you were going to take 10,000 people, but 70,000 died today." Death answered, "Don't get mad at me. I only took 10,000. Worry killed all the rest."

Worry has an uncanny knack for killing people. The poet Robert Frost (1874–1963) wrote, "The reason why worry kills more people than work is because more people worry than work", Worry has become an Australian pastime. For many people, worry has become so ingrained in their personalities that once the old worries are gone they search for new ones. They've become dependent on worry as a lens through which to view life, and they've forgotten any other way to live. Is there reason to be worried today? Most people would say there is. High energy costs, a worsening national deficit, rogue nuclear nations, threats of terrorism, unstable government, and tension in the Middle East—all these make for uncertain times. Economic stress is taking its toll on Australians' emotional and physical health. Surveys show that more than half of Australians report irritability, anger, fatigue, or sleeplessness. Almost half say they self-medicate by overeating or indulging in unhealthy foods. Money and the economy topped the list of stressors for at least 80 percent of those surveyed. Finances now overshadow the more typical daily stressors of work and relationships.

Fortunately, in the midst of a world of "worry-warts," Jesus isn't worried. Even better, Jesus has a definitive word for you. In our Gospel reading, he says, "*Don't worry, be hopeful.*" Now there are some passages in the New Testament that are difficult to interpret, but this is not one of them. Jesus uses the word "worry" six times and He says, "Don't worry" three times. Jesus is against high anxiety and unhealthy worry. Consequently, He provides two reasons you shouldn't worry.

First, worry is an exercise in futility (6:25–30).

Jesus promises to meet your needs because He cares for you. He begins this section with a negative command: "For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on" (6:25a). The phrase "For this reason" ties back to 6:24. Jesus' point is: If you can't serve God *and* money, then you can't worry about the material things that money can buy. The phrase "do not be worried" can be literally translated "stop worrying." Jesus wants His followers to

stop worrying over food, drink, and clothes because He will meet their basic material needs. Now, I need to post two disclaimers.

First, don't worry doesn't mean don't plan. The King James Version helpfully translates the phrase “do not be worried” as “take no thought.” This is misleading because it gives the impression that future planning is unnecessary. Over the years, many people have mistakenly assumed that this is a prohibition against career ambition, financial planning, and life insurance. But this is not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is pro-planning! He wants you to work and plan for your future. To do otherwise is to be foolish.

Second, don't worry doesn't mean don't be concerned. If you're not concerned about the brakes in your car, you're a terrible driver. If you're not concerned about your health, you're a fast-food junkie. You need to have some degree of *healthy* concern. Otherwise you won't meet deadlines or have medical checkups. The root idea of the verb “worry” means “to be pulled apart.” There's a difference between concern and worry. Concern is when you can do something to help a situation, so you do what you can do. Worry is when you can't do something, but you don't want to leave it up to God. In other words, worry is concern gone haywire. You can spiritualize it all you want, but worry is essentially a sin. If you are a worrying Christian, you are a sinning Christian. It doesn't carry much weight that you have faith in God, then act like you can't trust God to preserve your life. Worry is a hideous sin because it is an indictment against God, it is a denial of divine love. So *don't worry, be hopeful.* Jesus now gives four reasons why you shouldn't worry.

First, God will ensure your survival. Jesus says, “Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (6:25b) Jesus provides an argument from the greater to the lesser. Since God gave you life, He can surely sustain that life. Almost tongue-in-cheek Jesus says, “If you are going to worry, at least worry about something important, such as your life.” We worry whether we are going to have enough to eat. Jesus says we better worry about whether we are going to be alive to chew. God says, “If I'm going to wake you up tomorrow, I'm going to feed you. Now which is easier? Feeding you or waking you up? Don't worry about breakfast tomorrow. Worry about whether your heart is going to stop tonight. Worry about whether I'm going to keep your brain working and your heart pumping. If you're determined to worry, worry about that.” Now most of us don't worry about stuff like that. We assume when we go to bed at night that we are going to wake up the next day. Jesus says, “If God has the power to keep you alive and wake you up tomorrow, then God will see to it that you have something to eat and something to wear tomorrow.” If you buy into a Creating God, you must buy into a Sustaining God—or you're simply inconsistent. On a much smaller scale, if you are given a precious but vulnerable gift, it will probably come in a box. Similarly, if God gives you life, God will take care of that life. Jesus anticipates a follow-up question: God can provide, but will He provide?

Second, God will meet your material needs. Jesus says, “Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

Are you not worth much more than they?" (6:26)

Jesus now moves from the lesser to the greater. The word translated "look" is a compound verb that can be translated "take a good look at." Since humankind is created in the image of God, men and women are far more valuable to God than birds (Matt 10:31 and 12:12). Birds expend energy in doing what is natural, such as building nests and collecting food for their young, yet it is actually God who feeds and clothes them. The point is that when God's people live responsibly, God is faithful and will carry out the divine responsibilities. We have observed first-hand that God provides for the birds because He loves them. They disclose the divine purpose and have abilities and beauty not given to us. At one time or another, you may have heard from a family member or friend the message, "You are unlovable." Words like, "Can't you do anything right?" or "Why can't you be more like ... ?" or "What's wrong with you?" or "I've found someone else." These words erode your sense of value may you to doubt whether even God loves you. Yet, the last phrase of 6:26 declares your value to God. If God cares for the birds, how much more valuable are you? Don't worry, be hopeful.

Third, God will grant your allotted days. Jesus says, "And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life?" (6:27). Worrying may actually shorten your life. Are you worrying so much that you're losing sleep? God stays up all night, so why should you? You're the one who needs to sleep! There was a man who began to worry that he would get cancer. The serious disease had been prevalent in his family, so he began to worry about it. He worried about it for thirty years and then suddenly died of a heart attack. Worrying is such a waste of time. Should you be concerned about your health? Absolutely. Should you do the best you can to stay healthy? Absolutely. But after you've done all that you can do, don't worry. The word worry comes from an old Anglo-Saxon word that means "to choke" or "to strangle." That's an apt description of what worry does to us. Worry won't stretch our bank accounts, bring back a prodigal son or daughter, or keep cancer or senility at bay. But it will cause us to lose sleep. It will give us stomach ulcers, high blood pressure, and severe headaches. It will sour your mood, distance you from friends and eventually stifle your relationship with God. It not only has physical consequences, it has spiritual consequences as well. Worry is never going to take you anywhere. It's futile to think that worrying is going to do anything to resolve some difficulty in your life. It accomplishes nothing. It doesn't put more money in the bank; it doesn't make your body well; it doesn't reverse a decline in commodity prices. So don't worry, be hopeful. And if you worry, work on leaving it behind.

Fourth, God will cover your external appearance. Jesus says, "And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!" (6:28–30) At first glance, Jesus' words about the lilies, like the birds, are lovely if not sentimental, but they are not very compelling. Sure, birds and lilies don't worry about life, but they also don't have farm mortgages, car payments, electricity bills, and unpredictable weather to keep them awake at night. Yet, here, Jesus says, "God will meet your need for clothing." You may not be decked

out in designer wear, but you'll have what you need.

The verb "observe" is a strong word. It means more than just a mere casual glance. It means to study the beauty of the flowers. The emphasis shifts slightly in 6:30 where Jesus speaks of the clothing of "the grass of the field." Like flowers, grass is transient and even less impressive. Yet, God clothes the grass whether we fertilize the paddock or not. Jesus longs for us to learn a lesson from the flowers and grass. He closes with a rebuke: "You of little faith," which is an expression only directed to Jesus' disciples. It indicates not an absence of faith but deficiency of faith. Jesus is saying, "Trust God to meet your needs." God's trustworthiness is the issue. Did God take care of you yesterday? What about the day before? What about the day before that? Then, how come you're worried today or tomorrow? What kind of God do you worship? Some people have sufficient faith to believe God will preserve their life beyond death but not enough to believe God will get them through the next twenty-four hours or the coming week. They are absolutely confident of eternity but are terrified of the here-and-now.

Let me close with one more analogy. Fog can blanket an entire village and reduce visibility to a few metres. But if you could compress that fog into water, it would barely fill a single glass. Worry is like a gigantic fog that can blind you and cause you to take your eyes off of the things of God. But when you see worry for what it really is, you realize that it is nothing more than a mere glass of water. When you try to actually grab onto the worry that you are consumed with, it is so fleeting that it isn't even there. Jesus says, "God will guide you through the fog of worry if you will be led into the new day. God alone can overcome your worries. *Don't worry, be hopeful.*"