

## **Message for January 31, 2021**

### **Matthew 6:25-34**

“The Sinking of the Mariposa Belle” is a story written by the great humourist of days gone by, Stephen Leacock, and is considered by many people to be a Canadian classic. For those who are not familiar with it, the story is a spoof of a great maritime disaster. The ship was a lake steamer that sank in a couple of feet of water and while no one was ever in any real danger, the reader does not realize this until well into the story. While the entire story is humorous, one episode in particular appeals to me. It begins with the men on the ship lowering the lifeboat.

“There were men leaning out over the rail of the Mariposa Belle with lanterns that threw the light as they let her down, and the glare fell on the water and the reeds. But when they got the boat lowered, it looked such a frail clumsy thing as one saw it from the rail above, that the cry was raised ‘Women and children first!’ For what was the sense, if it should turn out that the boat wouldn’t even hold women and children, of trying to jam a lot of heavy men into it!

So they put in mostly women and children and the boat pushed out into the darkness so freighted down it would hardly float.

In the bow of it was the Presbyterian student who was relieving the minister and he called out that they were in the hands of Providence. But he was crouched and ready to spring out of them at the first moment.”

I find this both so humorous and yet so believable; I can just imagine the student, the minister-to-be, crouched in the boat calling upon everyone to sit still and trust in God, all the while being ready to jump out himself at the first sign of danger. I suspect though that the gap between what that student said and what he truly believed is typical of all of us at times. That we are however to always put our trust and hope in God no matter what, is of course the message of today’s scripture passage.

Today's passage is taken from Jesus' most famous sermon of all, the Sermon on the Mount. In that sermon Jesus told his listeners that they should not be anxious about life and its necessities; rather they were to put their trust in God. Jesus then used the birds as an example. They do not plant or reap crops. Why they do not even gather their food and store it and yet God provides for them. And if God looks after them, then won't he do that much and more for us, we who are his beloved children? And since God truly is looking after us what is the point in worrying about life and its problems? Besides, as Jesus pointed out, all the worrying in the world never accomplished anything.

Judging by the text, it appears that Jesus either thought that the people really didn't understand what he was saying or perhaps didn't believe him. He decided then to use yet another example from the world of nature. Consider the wildflowers all around them, he said. Like the birds above, the flowers do not work or provide for themselves and yet look at how beautiful they are. Why even King Solomon in all his fabled wealth and glory never looked as beautiful as one of these flowers! And if God cared enough to make the beautiful flowers, that are here today and gone tomorrow, then once again we can be sure that God cares about us. And since God truly does love and care about us, why worry?

In conclusion, Jesus gave his listeners some very practical down-to-earth advice. He told them not to be anxious about tomorrow for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Rather, let the day's own troubles be sufficient for the day. In other words, don't worry about what may or may not happen tomorrow; just take everything slowly one day at a time, trusting God all the while. And doesn't this sound so appealing? Don't be anxious, don't worry about life and its problems, just trust in God and everything will be alright! However is it really that easy to stop worrying and put all our trust in God all the time no matter what? If we are honest about it then the answer is no. This isn't always easy to do at the best of times and now certainly isn't the best of times.

In the past while when talking to people I have noticed that many are feeling rather 'down'. Indeed that so many people in society at large are feeling this way is confirmed by numerous surveys and opinion polls. Its certainly not hard to see why. This past week marked the one-year anniversary of the first diagnosed Covid-19 case in Canada and we have been living with various levels

of restrictions for the last ten months. To be sure there is reason for optimism with the roll-out of the vaccines and yet, with the delays and the sheer monumental task of immunizing enough people so that the restrictions can be lifted, many people are realizing more and more how long it may be before things return to 'normal'. And even as the number of infections are dropping, the tragedy continues in so many of our long-term care homes. Add to this the mounting concern over the variants that can spread much more quickly than the regular virus, it is no wonder that so many people are feeling worn down or even depressed by it all.

In circumstances such as these it offers us little comfort to hear someone glibly say "don't worry, just trust God. He looks after the birds and the flowers and will certainly look after you too!" This can sound so unrealistic and the great temptation may be to simply dismiss Jesus' words as being those of an otherworldly dreamer. To do that however would be a mistake for whatever else Jesus was, an impractical otherworldly dreamer was not one of them.

If one goes back to the original Greek text of the New Testament, Jesus never actually said "*never* be anxious, *never* worry". Rather what he told his listeners was that they were not to be *unduly* preoccupied or excessively concerned about life's problems. In other words what he said was that we are not to let our fears dominate our lives.

Far too often today's passage has been interpreted to mean that no matter what, we should never worry and that worrying shows a lack of faith or trust on our part. This however simply isn't true. There are times when we can't avoid worrying and Jesus knew this. Why sometimes Jesus himself was anxious and worried. Do we really believe for example that Jesus wasn't anxious or afraid on the night in which he was betrayed? Of course he was! If he wasn't then he would never have prayed that the cup be taken away from him and that he might not suffer and die on the cross. Jesus however didn't allow his fear to paralyze or dominate him. He still put his trust and faith in God, and this is what we are called to do too. We are called to try and put our trust in God and not allow ourselves to be dominated by fear and worry. In fact our own spiritual tradition tells us how to deal with fear and stress.

When we are worried or feeling overwhelmed, what we ought to do is find a quiet place, relax, and then either verbally or mentally keep repeating the words of a comforting Bible verse to ourselves, a verse such as:

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

Or, from the same psalm:

“I will fear no evil for thou art with me,  
Thy rod and staff, they comfort me.”

There are also other verses that may be appropriate such as:

“The Lord is my light and my salvation,  
Of whom shall I be afraid?”

And,

“If God is for us, who can be against us?”

If we prefer, we could use a meaningful line from a favourite hymn instead. The important thing is that by simply sitting still and either verbally or mentally repeating an appropriate line or verse, we will calm ourselves, put things in perspective and remember that we are not alone, that God is indeed with us. Can we avoid all worry? Of course not, but we can try and not let it dominate us. We can, as a popular song from days gone by puts it, choose to “Put our hand in the hand of the man who stilled the water”. Truly, the student in Stephen Leacock’s story spoke the truth, we are in the hands of Providence!