

2025 TALK – LENT 2, PSALM 37:1-8,39&40, MATT 6:25-34

LIVING A RESTFUL LIFE

There's a story I heard this week. It's a story of a farmer who had a son. One day his son rushed into the farmhouse very excited. 'I've just found a stallion. It's on our land. Isn't that good news?' The farmer didn't at all get excited, like his son. He shrugged & said: 'Maybe it's good news, maybe it's not such good news'... The next day, some people from the village rushed to the farm. They were very animated. They shouted at the farmer: 'We've got some bad news. We just saw your son get thrown from a horse. He's broken his leg & can't walk. Isn't that terrible?'. The farmer, as he set off to see his son, simply said: 'That sounds bad, but who knows?'. The following week, the army visited the village. All the young people of the village were conscripted for the war. But the farmer's son was not taken, because he wasn't able to walk ...

There's a lot of wisdom in this story. Wisdom in the farmer's measured response to events. It seems to me that our social media-driven world is like the son & like those villagers. There's always some supposedly good or bad news that we are being invited to react to. Something for us to get excited about. Or something for us to be horrified by. It feels like we are constantly expected to see-saw between one extreme or the other. And this seems to be even more true, ever since Donald Trump was re-elected to the White House. Yes, there are lots of things to be horrified by. Almost anything that comes from the US President's mouth. But, the fact remains, God (not Donald Trump) is LORD over the nations. Who knows? God by His grace, is able to bring good things, miraculously, out of this Presidency. (Who knows, God may yet deal with Trump as he dealt with King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon...? Or God might even do as he did with King Cyrus of Persia, and amazingly work through him).

Psalm 37 also contains words of wisdom. Wisdom which takes the long view. God's wisdom is always 'long wisdom'. God tells him that wrong-doers & their plans will come to nothing. I can't help thinking, for example, of all those scammers, spending their time trying to swindle other people out of their savings. They may appear to succeed, to live a luxury lifestyle for a time, but like grass they will soon wither. We might be tempted to say, 'not soon enough'. But God reminds the Psalmist, and us too, that no-one will escape God's judgement. Both in this world & in the world to come.

But the Psalmist does so much more than simply to remind himself of the fate of those who try to live without God. No. He leaves us with much more positive advice about how to live God's way. He shares with his readers what he has learned from his own experience of how to combat fretting about evil. He tells them & us:

'Trust in the LORD & do good...'

'Take delight in the LORD...'

'Commit your way to the LORD'...

'Be still before the LORD & wait patiently for your God'...

And that's not all. The Psalmist reminds us of God's promised response when we live like this, when we walk with God. He tells us, not once but twice, that God will '... give us the desires of our hearts'. He tells us that God will make 'our righteous reward shine like the dawn, our vindication like the noonday sun'. He tells us that, '...God will be our stronghold in times of trouble'. Alleluia! Our LORD promises to 'help & deliver & save' those who trust in Him. Those who take refuge in him. Alleluia!...

One of the things which is striking about this Psalm is the proximity of 'fretting' with evil. Bad things are doubly associated with fretting. First, the Psalmist finds himself fretting because he sees evil people seemingly succeeding in their wicked schemes. But later he is reminded that this fretful reaction (understandable as it might be) is itself not good. The Psalmist tells himself: 'Do not fret, it leads only to evil'. There is a vicious circle here, that we too can end up getting caught up in.

Let's move on to thinking about the words of Jesus in the gospels. We all can readily agree about not 'fretting'. But how many of us struggle with the words of Matthew 6 & Luke 12? Jesus tells us: '**Do not worry**'... I know I struggle with these 3 words of command from the lips of Jesus. How many times does God tell his people in the Bible: 'Do not be afraid'...? And yet, of course, there IS plenty to be afraid of, to be anxious & worried about when we are confronted with our world. There is indeed, as Jesus himself acknowledges here in Matthew 6, & also memorably in John's gospel, plenty of 'trouble' in this world & in our own lives...

If there was anyone who had plenty of reason to be worried & troubled, it was Jesus himself. As we progress through this season of Lent, the cross of Jesus

casts a longer & longer shadow. This is inescapable in the gospels. One of the questions I ask myself about the ministry of Jesus is this: How long did Jesus know about the awful death which awaited him? How much did he know about how awful it would be to die for the sins of the world? This prospect was not that far down the road, around 3 years away from when he began his ministry. And never that far away in his mind. He knew - at some point - that his most fateful death awaited him in the holy city of Jerusalem. The place of God's Temple, supposedly God's 'dwelling place', which he visited, both as an infant & as a teenager. But he tried to avoid Jerusalem for most of his ministry.

I'm guessing we all know the Holman Hunt paintings of Jesus, Light of the World.? Hunt painted more than one version of this picture, which shows Jesus, holding a lantern, knocking on the door of our hearts & asking to come in. But there is a much less well-known painting, also by Holman Hunt. It shows a very young Jesus in Joseph's carpentry workshop. Jesus is busy helping Joseph making an item of furniture, or something. And behind Jesus, on the wall, is the shadow of the cross. Now it's possible that Jesus knew about his death that early. But I think it is more likely that this was perhaps first revealed to him, in the wilderness after his baptism, just before he began his ministry. I can imagine, His Heavenly Father gradually revealing further details, as he went along. After he was rejected by his neighbours from Nazareth, perhaps. After John the Baptist was executed. No doubt our Heavenly Father was gentle in revealing what his death would be like. For who could live for long with this kind of knowledge? Hopefully, the awfulness of his sacrifice for all sin, was only fully revealed to Jesus at the Garden of Gethsemane, just before he was betrayed with a kiss.

Jesus shared the awful prediction of his death with his friends, around half way through his ministry. It's likely he had been carrying this knowledge for some time. It's not surprising that Peter reacts to this news with his first denial... 'This can't be LORD... I don't want to hear about this...'. Another case of something which seems terrible actually turning out for good, in God's hands.

So, Jesus lived with the knowledge of the cross for many years, possibly right throughout his ministry. And yet he was able, more than anyone, to 'live a restful life'. He was never crippled with anxiety. But more than just living a restful life, he lived a completely fruitful life.

So, how can we live a more 'restful life'? So that we too, like Jesus, can live a fruitful life? I don't think that in Matthew 6, Jesus is saying that we will never worry about anything. Or that we should never spend any time worrying. These are, after all, worldly worries he is talking about here. And it is very clear that Jesus himself was at times wracked with anxiety. Most notably at the Garden of Gethsemane, just hours before his terrible ordeal on the cross. But what Jesus IS saying is that worry need not become a constant theme in our lives. We might find ourselves at times worrying about all manner of things. But, as Jesus did every day, we are meant to bring these cares to our God in prayer – and to leave them with God. It's the only way Jesus could have been so full of God's Holy Spirit. By every day entrusting the burdens he carried with his Heavenly Father. We are not called to live a life of worrying, but a life of trusting - trusting in the love of our Heavenly Father.

How can we stop ourselves from letting worry become too much of a theme in our lives? From not spending too long fretting over things. How?... By listening to God's 'long wisdom'. God again offers us 'long wisdom' today. God reminds us, today as we gather round the table of Jesus, and also every day, that God's love will overcome. Alleluia? Jesus has won the victory over sin, darkness & death. Alleluia? This is the good news of the tortuous cross & empty tomb of our Saviour... Alleluia! As the Apostle Paul so succinctly put it: 'There is **nothing** in all creation which can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus'... Thanks be to our HF, to Jesus His Son, to the Holy Spirit, whom God has given us!. Praise the LORD!

Let me finish by reminding you of the closing words of Psalm 37. (READ Psalm 37:39&40): 'The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD; God is ***our*** stronghold in times of trouble. The LORD helps us & delivers us. God delivers us from the wicked & saves us, because we take refuge in the LORD'. (We might also proclaim: 'The salvation of the ***UN***righteous comes from the LORD' also. Let's not forget, as Paul puts it, that 'God demonstrates his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us'. Thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus, the perfect sacrifice for our sin. Thanks be to God for the gift of the Holy Spirit, who assures us that we have peace with God through our Saviour, Jesus.