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Sermon

Don't be Dominated by Anxiety **John 14:27-28 ; Psalm 42; Ephesians 5:8-14**

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Mary Townley's husband Frank said to me last week, "These are trying times." How nicely put – "Trying times." Frank fought in the Malaya Campaign after the War. He like many of you would remember TB outbreaks and the Polio epidemic of the 1950s when schools were closed from early December to mid-April. That history and self-discipline allow him to describe the current situation as "trying times."

Let's not be dominated by anxiety and fear. Learne McGrath, Vicar of N.W. Anglican parish, posted this quote from C. S. Lewis on Facebook. It was written in 1948 entitled, "On Living in an Atomic Age." If you substitute Corona virus for the atomic bomb it is surprisingly relevant.

"How are we to live in an atomic age?" I am tempted to reply: "Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents." In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. ...

This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, ..., chatting to our friends ... —not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.¹

In quoting this I am not saying we should ignore the sensible precautions advised by the Ministry of Health or refuse to self-isolate. I am referring to our state of mind: are we dominated by fear or by living as well as we may under the circumstances?

In the gospel reading, Jesus spoke to his disciples on the eve of his flogging and crucifixion and comforts them. He is facing an imminent torturous death and he said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. ... Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

¹ I have redacted the list of 'sensible and human things' so as not directly to subvert self-isolation - IH

He said it to them again when he met them on the evening of the resurrection, "Peace be with you." Again, he met them a week later – "Peace be with you." They were in perilous times – there would probably be a crackdown on his followers.

"Peace be with you:" Stop allowing yourselves to be anxious, worried and upset. Circumstances that cause us to lose our peace have been around for generations. Anxiety is nothing new. Are we trusting in circumstances which change or in God who is constant? Psalm 42:11 says, "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God."

What do we focus on? Yes, there is alarming news. But be careful not to fill your minds with the rumours and gossip about the crisis. Roy Smith told me he was at the supermarket on Thursday and saw a woman buying lots of meat. He asked her why she needed so much meat and she told him the supermarkets were going to be closed at midnight. It was not true – she had believed a foolish rumour and so was panic buying.

After the 9/11 attack, the news channels played that clip of the plane crashing into the Tower block over and over and over again. Some people became traumatized by that image. But, they weren't there; they had not been injured! Seeing it over and over again, imprinted it on their mind so became a haunting image which dominated their thinking with fear. For your own sake, don't allow the news media to fill your mind with fear and anxiety. Of course, you need to know what is happening but you don't need a mental diet of disaster, trauma, doom, fear, gloom, fear of disease, fear of death.

Keep calm and wash your hands! Be prudent but don't let anxiety rule your thinking. Rather accept the gift that Jesus gives his followers – his peace - a peace strong enough to face extreme pain and death.

Two years ago, Helen and I had the privilege of leading my cousin's son to Christ. Yesterday he drew my attention to the Word for Today article. (It is lovely to see a young Christian grow strongly in confidence in Christ.) The article reads:

The secret to 'perfect peace' lies in this Scripture: 'You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you' (Isaiah 26:3 NLT)! It's not your circumstances, but how you think about them that robs you of peace. Focusing on your circumstances just causes more anxiety, because circumstances constantly change and often spin out of your control. However, God never changes, and nothing ever spins out of his control.

We have a choice. Are we going to focus on the fearful ideas that surround us or will we trust that God is able to order our lives as we entrust them to him? It is a question of what we meditate upon.

There is positive meditation and there is negative meditation. Positive meditation focuses on what God has for us in the Bible and on what he has promised us both through it and personally. It is a practice of saying his words over to ourselves to focus our thoughts on what he says. We chew on his words like a sheep chewing cud to get the goodness from his word. It is a discipline of the mind to believe what God says first and throw off fear.

Negative meditation is also known as worry. You have seen a dog gnawing at a bone. It works and works to get every scrap of flesh off the bone. It licks, it bites, it scrapes those tissues to get all the flavour out of it. Worry is like that with negative thoughts. As we go over and over them, we get all the anxiety, all the fear, every bad scenario out of what we have heard and seen and it has to be said, what we have imagined.

The Word for Today article continues, "Peace and worry are mutually exclusive. Worry throttles your confidence, chokes your perspective and suffocates your spirit. It robs you of the peace that comes from knowing the God who can handle anything, and through whom all things are possible."

The Psalmist in Ps 42, remembers how he used to lead the joyful worship procession but now his enemies taunt him. My friends you know that this will be last time we meet together in person as a congregation in the next little while. It is a sad time in that knowledge. We have to protect each other as best we can and the advice is that we need to stop contact now before we do pass on infection. We may feel some longing for our worship together in the days ahead and we may need that support more than usual to face some challenges. The Parish Pandemic team, Wardens and staff will be working this week on organising ways we can support each other by phone, in practical ways and with worship resources to use at home. If you want to be part of

the answer, would you sign up in the foyer? If we don't have your email address it is harder to send these resources to you and let you know what is happening. Could you check the list in the foyer and add your email address if we don't have it?

The Psalmist in the midst of his difficulties affirms, "By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is with me--a prayer to the God of my life." God is attending to him and he finds within himself a song to God - a prayer. So it is that he orders his soul to come into line: "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God." You can use your will to direct your thoughts. Why are you downcast? Put our hope in God.

Jesus gives us his peace and he commissions us to be his light in the world. So St Paul told us in the Epistle to live as children of light. If we do that we will shine out with goodness, righteousness and truth which pleases God. As we go through what may be a dark time for New Zealand, let us shine forth with the light of Christ and be those who act out of those qualities of goodness, righteousness and truth. We can do it in Christ. We can do it from the place of peace he gives us. We can live as those who know their God, who trust their God and who love their God.

The black plague passed; the Vikings passed; the threat of TB has passed with pasteurisation, food hygiene and vaccinations, the polio epidemic passed and we now are vaccinated against it too. We will come out the other side of this crisis. And should any of us not come through, we will find ourselves promoted to glory! That is the worst that can happen to us – we get to see our Saviour face to face.

Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.