

We live in an age of anxiety. Dr. John Sutherland Bonnell who was pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City for many years entitles one chapter in his book, "No Escape from Life", "Anxiety- the Disease of Our Age." "We are an anxious, careworn, fretful generation", he writes. Jean Paul Sartre, the well known French philosopher and novelist writes, "Man is anxiety." By that he meant "to be a person means to be anxious". Anxiety is basic to our very human nature he believes.

Paul Tournier, the Swiss psychologist, gives one illustration after another of successful and wealthy businessmen and women who come to him. One would think they had enough in the area of material possessions that worry would be the least of their worries. But they come to him anxious, and obsessed by fears of the future. He writes in one of his books that the proportion of anxious people is higher among church people than among the rest. I wasn't really surprised to read that since I believe that God often uses worry and anxiety to bring us face to face with him and his power and providence.

Anxiety is as bad for health as smoking, drinking, and overeating. Anxiety shortens lives. Doctors tell us that anxiety is one of the contributing causes of heart attacks,

high blood pressure, and strokes. Worries often rob us of sleep at night. They cut down on our efficiency in making decisions. Anxieties are often the greatest cause of pain. From what I have read, a good deal of the pain that mothers experience in child-birth is a result of tension, anxiety, and the fear of pain. The Lamaze method of natural child-birth, that some of you have taken, is supposed to help mothers to relax, to overcome the tension of anxiety, and enable them to give birth without resort to drugs.

~~Now, as a minister, I have no authority to give you psychological advice as to how to overcome anxiety.~~ There are all kinds of ways to overcome it. A good psychologist can help us cope with anxiety. Hinduism and Yoga teach techniques which, if faithfully practiced, can help a person overcome anxiety and have peace of mind. You can take Compoz or some other tranquilizers. You can find release from your worries at the bottom of a whiskey bottle. You can escape worries by going insane. From what I've read schizophrenia is often caused by the desire to escape unbearable anxieties at any cost. In short, there are all kinds of ways to overcome worry. If your chief aim is to achieve peace of mind and contentment there are many ways of doing this apart from Christ.

One point I'd like to make in this sermon is that Jesus didn't come to teach us psychological techniques for overcoming anxiety. <sup>And I as a minister, certainly have no authority or competence...</sup> He didn't come as some kind of Indian guru to give us the secret of tranquillity and peace of mind.

And his main interest in our scripture lesson was not the mere removal of anxiety. His main concern was the kingdom of God. He did not come to give advice but to issue a command to those who are the victims of worry. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

There are some people who believe what Jesus commands has no relevance to the twentieth century. It's religious idealism. It leads to irresponsibility. His teaching is unworkable in the 20th century. Some scholars say that Jesus mistakenly believed that the world was going to come to an end shortly and that his death would usher in the eternal kingdom of God. ~~Rudolf Bultman writes that Jesus had this mistaken conviction that this age had come to an end. And he summarises the preaching of Jesus in the saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand."~~

This kind of thinking was very common in the days of Jesus. <sup>Many people believed that</sup> ~~The Last Judgment was at hand, and it would take place within the lifetime of the apostles.~~ <sup>Many people believed</sup> ~~the world was coming to a speedy end.~~ If Jesus and

shared this mistaken belief

his apostles ~~believed this~~ it was altogether reasonable not to worry about food and clothing. If the world is going to come to an end in a couple week or months there are more important things to worry about than food and clothing.

Some Christians, therefore, discount the teaching of Jesus. They say his teaching was based on this sincere but mistaken belief of the impending end of the world. They say we have to re-interpret the teaching of Christ since we no longer believe that the world is coming to an immediate end. But this ignores the plain teaching of Jesus who confessed that he didn't know when the end of world was coming. "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the son, but the Father only", he said. He also made provisions for the future by commissioning the apostles to take his message throughout the world.

In our scripture lesson, therefore, Jesus was not teaching something that can ~~so easily be discounted~~ <sup>be discounted so easily</sup>. He wasn't teaching irresponsible behaviour which ignores the future. Rather he was telling his apostles and his followers to get their priorities straight in life. The spiritual is more valuable than the material. God has the greatest claim on our lives. This is as true today as it was 2000

years ago. So John Sutherland Bonnell writes, "If Jesus were living in any great city today, he would still say, "Be not therefore anxious about the morrow."

Of course we have to think about tomorrow and plan for the future. Bishop Ryle of the Church of England writes, (but)  
 "Prudent provision for the future is right: wearing, corroding, self-tormenting anxiety is wrong." And John Calvin wrote, "In this speech Christ reproves the over anxious concern for food and clothing... He condemns excessive care."

We have a responsibility to care about ourselves and our families and the words of Jesus are not meant to absolve this responsibility. The apostle Paul wrote, "If a man provide not for his own, and especially for those of his household, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel." Once some Christians in Thessalonica decided not to work thinking that Christ would return soon. Paul laid down this well known dictum for them, "If any will not work neither shall he eat." This same thing is still with us today. Not too long ago I was talking to an insurance man who told me someone had refused to buy any life insurance because he was sure that Jesus was going to return in his lifetime. Jesus was not commending that kind of attitude about the future.

For Jesus it was a matter of priorities. "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness". We should be, first of all, concerned about our soul and our spiritual nourishment. If our first and foremost concern is for the kingdom of God and his righteousness then everything else will fall into place. We may not be as rich. We may not have as many clothes and as much food as others. But we will be more happy because we will be right with God.

John Reid once said in one of his sermons: We would call a man blind and foolish who starved himself to death so he would have enough money to buy the finest clothes. But he is also blind and foolish who neglects the needs of the soul, that he may secure wealth or the means of existence. Yet aren't we call at times, myself included, some concerned about our material welfare that we neglect to feed and nourish our souls on the word of God, prayer, and the sacraments.

Now all of us know men or women who are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good. They have used religion to escape from life. Jesus isn't advocating this. He isn't advocating a retreat from the world which ignores the physical needs of people. We all need food, clothing, and water. But if the kingdom of God and his righteousness

are sought first, before everything else, before personal gain, then many of the injustices and inequities of society will be done away with. There would be food and clothing enough for all. If only we would seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness there would not be such gross inequities in the world; there would not be on the one hand famine among hard working Pakistani's whose land suffers from chronic draught, and, on the other hand, such over consumption in the United States.

It was because the English evangelists of the 18th and 19th centuries sought first the kingdom of God and his righteousness that many of the gross injustices and inequities that Charles Dickens describes in his novels were corrected. Because of men and women like John Wesley, Bishop Wilburforce, Lord Shaftesbury, and Hannah More, slavery was abolished, crime and alcoholism were drastically reduced, child labor laws were enacted, and the gross inequities of the industrial revolution were greatly reduced.

These men and women sought first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. They were not airy idealists. They were activists and involved to the hilt in the affairs of their nation and of the world. They didn't mope about worrying about inflation and how the price of their food

and clothing were going up. They sought first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. And because they did many a poor man, woman, and child had to worry no more about food and clothing.

"Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Jesus is saying to his apostles, "Get your priorities straight." If Jesus is Lord he should be first in our lives. This has application, for one thing, to the corporate life of the church. In the past six years I have seen many needed material improvements in the church, but has there been an equivalent spiritual growth? Have we had a greater concern for the salvation of souls? Or do we think this is the monopoly of fundamentalists? There is usually great enthusiasm for projects which have to do with the physical improvement of the church but there seems to be embarrassment and reluctance when it comes to the spiritual concerns like the salvation of souls.

How refreshing it would be to have several members of the congregation say to one another, "I know so many people in the neighborhood who don't know Christ personally. They won't come to church but maybe they would be willing to take part in something like the Edge of Adventure discussion group if we met informally in our homes."



How refreshing it would be to have more of the congregation say to one another, "I know of so many children whose parents have taught them nothing about Jesus and who don't know about his love for them. What can we do to attract them to the Savior at an early age?"

How refreshing it would be to have several members of the congregation say to one another, "How little time we spend as a church in prayer. Let's get together periodically to do nothing more than to pray for this church, for individuals by name, and for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us."

How refreshing it would be to have more members of the

congregation say, "I have confessed Jesus as Lord but I *wants me to know little about the Bible. I know little about what God* hardly know him. *But I want to know and love him more.* Let's *get together regularly and* begin to study the Bible seriously. *together.*"

All these things are things which the elders, both the active and the inactive elders, should be in the forefront of, leading the way, setting the examples, and encouraging others in. But there should also be a groundswell of support by all of us for the spiritual priorities of the church. Shouldn't these things be the primary concerns of the church?

"Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

These words have also an application in our individual lives.

What is your greatest concern? Jesus says, "Is not life more than food?" The word used for "life" is the Greek word for soul. It's the same word as when Jesus says, "What does it profit to gain the whole world but lose your soul." In other words Jesus is saying that our soul is far more valuable than food or clothing or material things. In your family, is this true? Does God come before everything else?

If we give our children everything they need in the way of food, clothing, and fun and yet show little concern for their spiritual welfare what good have we done in the long run? Have you been concerned that your child knows God? Have you been as concerned that your child knows God as you are concerned about tooth decay, vaccinations, and their report cards? Are you more concerned that they get into to kingdom of God than into college? Have you taught them the daily discipline of prayer from the time they were children? *Do they know that prayer is important to you?* ~~were a/children?~~ Could the apostle Paul say of your child what he said to Timothy, "from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

Is the kingdom of God first in your life? The Revd. John Middlekauf said, in an article appearing in the Expository Times, "In the early days of the Christian church, thousands of Christians went to their deaths rather than burn incense to Caesar and say, 'Caesar is Lord.' They might have argued: 'I am needed at home. If I persist in refusing to go through this ceremony, I will die and my children will starve. Therefore, in this situation, the loving thing would be to burn the incense.' If they had not been willing to pay the price that loyalty to God's kingdom demanded, where would the religion of Jesus Christ be today?" ~~"Does the kingdom of God and his righteousness have that kind of priority in your lives and in your homes?"~~

The point I want to leave with you is this. There are many ways of overcoming worry; we can do it with pills, liquor, psychologists, yoga, and transcendental meditation. But Jesus didn't come merely to take away our worries and give us peace of mind. He came to place before us a far greater concern that makes all our worries pale in insignificance. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Make that your greatest purpose in life and everything else will fall into place.

AMEN.