**Priorities**

Romans 8:18-25

Matthew 6:25-34

Themes:

1. Providing support to those who need it
2. Trusting God and worrying less, having a go and persevering
3. To step out in faith

When did you last stop and watch a child play? When they are absorbed in what they are doing they are oblivious to what is going on around them.

They want to have a go, try new things, see what works and, if they have been loved and encouraged, they will persevere if things go wrong.

It is how children learn.

They start to develop resilience. This is a big part of the early years’ agenda, because it has been recognised that resilience helps children to overcome adversity and develop good mental health, something that is high on the government agenda now.

But it has become part of that agenda because of a big increase in the numbers of children needing help to cope with life as it is today.

If children do not receive the love, the care and the stimulation that they need then this is what happens:

PICTURE

It impacts on their development in a big way.

We can discuss, and probably argue over the changes in our culture which have contributed towards some children’s poor mental health, but recent surveys have identified that our children are some of the unhappiest in the world. In 2016 The Guardian reported on research which showed that, out of 16 countries British children ranked 13, having only 40% of children showing high levels of well-being.

Our children worry more. Do we worry more than previous generations?

We have just had the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the German Nazi concentration and extermination camp at Auschwitz (27th January), and we will shortly be celebrating 75 years of VE day.

Some of the survivors who are still alive go around schools, talking to children. They want to share their stories, as a way of educating children about what life was like, and as a warning of what hatred can do. I am sure that they worried when they did not know what the future would hold for them.

Let’s just take a moment to go back to the beginning.

Genesis 1:27-28 – So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply” Verse 31 says “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good”.

It was very good.

We are part of a bigger picture. Sometimes we can get too centred on ourselves and forget that we are part of God’s much bigger picture.

We are part of God’s creation, and God sees His creation as very good.

Psalm 136 says “give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever.” God did not create the world to leave us to get on with it, He created the world so that He could be involved with it, love it and have a relationship with it, including us.

Psalm 139:13-14 reminds us “for it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made”.

Our reading today talks about worrying. Some of the disciples were successful fisherman who had given up everything for this charismatic rabbi from Nazareth.

Understandably they are now uncertain of the future and anxious about how they will survive. What will they eat, drink, wear?

Reality is starting to hit home.

Have you ever started out on something, full of enthusiasm, only to have doubts later on?

I can say that I definitely have. My reader training is one example, it has been hard and there are times when I have wondered if I have misunderstood what God was asking me to do, or if I actually had the gifts that I needed.

I have had doubts, not least about my being able to meet the requirements of the training.

What did I do? I prayed, and sought support from those who are supporting and overseeing my training. God spoke to me through his word and in my prayers.

And God loved me through his people.

I believe that if God has asked us to do something, he will not let us down.

What are the things that you worry about? Take a moment to consider this honestly.

Anxiety means that we worry, it is a state of mind, sometimes we may worry too much.

It does not mean that we should not have a responsible concern, in our story today Jesus is talking about priorities. First things first – put God first.

The NRSV translates it “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well”.

It is about getting our priorities right. God will provide if we put him first.

The righteousness that Matthew talks about is about our inward motivation as much as our outward performance. It is about right living, the highest values of a true disciple.

We may not get it right all the time, but if our priority is to put God first and serve Him then God knows that.

If we are doing what we do for the right reasons, God knows that and will honour that.

Food, drink and clothing are less important than your life and the body which those things supply.

Psalm 139 again says “search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.

God knows what our priorities are.

God was there at our beginning; he can be trusted to provide what we need.

Matthew is not saying that we don’t need to work; we are more valuable to God than the birds and God provides for them so will he not provide for us?

Anxiety does not allow us to live in the fulness of God and that is what God wants for us.

Anxiety can stand in the way of faith, can get in the way of trusting Jesus, as in stilling of storm in 8:23-27 when the disciples were worried and woke Jesus up to save them.

How do we learn?

In the same way as children trust those who love and help them, we need to trust and commit to what God is asking us to do. We need to be willing to have a go, to persevere. In doing this in our faith we develop resilience.

Like children we need the love and encouragement of those around us.

I would not have got this far with my Reader training had I not had the love and encouragement of both individuals and of you, as my church fellowship.

Sometimes I think it is a good thing that we don’t know what is ahead.

It is called stepping out in faith.

We will be looking more at this in our lent course.

God loves us.

He will provide for us if we are striving for the kingdom of God and His righteousness and have it as our top priority.

What is God asking you to do today?

How often do you pray for our church and for individual members of it?

We all have challenges in our lives, but knowing that people are praying for us can sustain us.

Psalm 20: 1-2 says this:

The Lord answer you in the day of trouble! The name of the God of Jacob protect you! May he send you help from the sanctuary, and give you support from Zion.

We may not know everyone’s individual circumstances but we can still pray for them, that God will surround people with His love, fill people with His peace, and provide for their needs.

We may find that we are the answer to our prayers as God opens up opportunities for us to serve each other.

Just as love, care and support can help children to grow and flourish, love care and support can help us all to grow as Christians.

What can you do this week?

Are we **all** willing to offer love and encouragement to each other as we seek to work together for God’s kingdom and righteousness?

Are you ready to step out in faith?

Amen