

2nd Sunday before Lent (Year A) : 27th February 2011

In an old Peanuts cartoon, Linus is talking to Charlie Brown and observes: "I guess it's wrong always to be worrying about tomorrow. Maybe we should think only about today." Charlie Brown replies, "No, that's giving up. I'm still hoping that yesterday will get better."

Are you one of those people whose glass is always half full or one of those whose glass is always half empty?

Do you live in hope or do you live in fear?

Today's Gospel reading reminds me of that song, "Don't worry, be happy". If it comes on the radio as I'm driving along, I either merrily sing along with it, or turn the radio off in disgust, depending on whether I'm having a good day or a bad day.

And just as there are some songs that sometimes grate with me, I have to be honest and say that there are also a few of Jesus' sayings that also irritate me. They irritate me because my instinctive human reaction is to say, "That's all well and good but....."

And yes, you've guessed it, today's Gospel, on a superficial reading at least, is a case in point.

"Don't worry", says Jesus. That's all well and good, but at a time of economic recession, when people are losing their jobs and are fearful of losing their home; when some families wonder how they will survive, those words can have a very hollow ring to them.

At a time when Christchurch in New Zealand reels under the devastating effects of the recent earthquake, and Australia mops up after the destruction of terrible floods, the words "Don't worry" don't really cut much ice.

In a world where there are major political upheavals in various North African states, and where one of them is run by the unpredictable Colonel Gaddafi, the words "Don't worry" can sound glib and meaningless.

In any event, the medics and psychologists tell us that a certain amount of stress and anxiety is actually quite good for us. It gets the adrenaline flowing, so the heart keeps pumping and the mind stays alert.

We're told that when our bodies exhibit the signs of stress, it's evidence that our in-built "fight or flight" defence system is functioning, and we're being made ready to take on whatever imminent threat is coming our way.

There are some people who pride themselves on being "born worriers"; they look for the potential problems at every turn; their imagination operates permanently in pessimistic mode. But isn't it true that all of us are, to some extent at least, born worriers? Most of us instinctively find something to worry about, whether it's our health or our finances or what our children are up to.

Fortunately, most of us manage to live with our anxieties without becoming dysfunctional. It's when our worries get completely out of hand that the trouble starts.

Years ago I knew a middle-aged woman who was quite intelligent and, in the nicest possible way, very ordinary. After living a very full life, she suddenly became a recluse. All of a sudden, she refused to leave the house. The reason was that she was very worried that she might get run over by a car or a bus, or get mugged in the street.

All of these things were, of course, possible; but they weren't probable, and living our life fully is a process of taking calculated risks. But for this woman, something in her psyche short-circuited and she was paralysed by fear, and despite the intervention of various psychiatrists and psychologists, she never did leave the house again until the day she died.

Worry can be a powerful thing, and it stems usually from our sense of not being in control. When our bodies malfunction, when there are seismic events literally in New Zealand and metaphorically in Libya, when our government insists that desperate austerity measures are necessary to get the economy back on track, we have to recognise that we're not in control, and it's not a comfortable place to be.

So what are we to make of Jesus' exhortation not to worry?

Isn't he effectively asking us to be something less than human in abandoning our instinctive anxiety?

Well actually, a more thoughtful reading of today's Gospel shows that isn't what he's saying at all. Jesus isn't just glibly saying "Don't worry" in the way that some people do. He isn't even just reiterating that old truism that worrying won't help the situation, although he does express exactly that when he says, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"

What he's actually doing is addressing the very heart of our anxiety, going to the root of the problem. We may not be in control, but God is; and we are infinitely precious to God.

Most of us have sufficient confidence in other people to relinquish control in some situations; whether it's the partner whose driving skills we trust to drive us somewhere, or the surgeon whom we trust to sort out our bodily malfunctions. To some extent we're all used to allowing others to be in control and yet not worrying – or at least not worrying to the point where we become dysfunctional.

That, I believe, is the message of today's Gospel; that despite our instinctive need to feel in control, despite our natural anxiety about those things we can't control, we trust in God who is ultimately in control.

For those who have no faith, the world is a totally random and cruel place where terrible things happen, and all we have to look forward to ultimately is the oblivion of death.

For those of us who believe, there is another ingredient in the mix of life and as we were reminded in our second lesson, that ingredient is hope.

Hope means that despite the apparent awfulness of what's happening to us or around us, this isn't the whole story. At the very heart of our belief as Christians is the conviction that we *do* have more to look forward to than the oblivion of death, and that God is in control, however much it may appear that he's absent and inactive.

But there's more. Having a faith and living in hope doesn't mean that we simply sit back and watch society disintegrate or allow warfare to flourish or just let humankind spiral into self-destruction. If we believe that God

is in control, if we hope that God's kingdom will ultimately come, then as Christ's disciples, we have a role to play; that role is about demonstrating the love and concern of God and actively striving to build his kingdom.

So we don't and can't just look on from afar and pityingly watch those who've lost everything through natural disaster or war; we do something to help, however small and apparently insignificant it may be. We don't just stand by and watch the most vulnerable members of our society suffer as a result of the economic climate; we do something.

There's a lot of talk at the moment about the "Big Society". I'm one of those people who still can't get my head around what the Big Society is meant to be; but whether you believe in the big society or not, and whether you understand it or not, you can be sure of one thing; the Kingdom of God is a darn sight bigger, and a darn sight better, and *that* is what you and I are called to build. We're called to feed the hungry and to get justice for the oppressed.

Today's Gospel, far from being a glib directive to stop worrying, is in fact a call to action. At its core are these words,

Do not worry saying "What will we eat or what will we drink or what will we wear?" but strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Put another way: "Don't worry; *Do something*".

And here's one last thought.

Having a faith and living in hope can change how we see the past. Sometimes good things come out of apparent past disasters. Even the pain of bereavement becomes more bearable with time, and some traumatic past events can lose some of their power when they're revisited with a renewed sense of hope; Good Friday looks very different viewed from Easter Day; so maybe Charlie Brown had a point and even yesterday can get better.

Amen.