

Mt 6:25-27 & Phil 4:4-7
Tim Anderson 23/7/2023
Dealing with mental illness

I had rostered Rhys Bezzant from Ridley College to be preaching today. Unfortunately, Rhys had to attend a funeral in Germany.

So I was left with a hole in the roster to fill with a one off sermon.

I decided

after chatting with the members of the Monday afternoon Bible Study, to tackle the subject of mental illness.

Mental illness is a large and growing problem in the community.

When I was a kid, you heard about the odd person facing depression.

Anxiety was very rare.

Schizophrenia and what was then called manic depression

and these days is called bi polar disorder were also very rare.

Fast forward forty years and the situation has changed dramatically.

Anxiety is in plague proportions.

Cherida is a chaplain at Cardinia Primary School.

She has written a course for primary school kids facing anxiety.

I'm not telling you this so you can say

"What a talented woman your wife is, Tim!

How did you manage to get so lucky?"

I know that, I don't need you to remind me all the time.

The point is that there is so much demand for helping kids with anxiety that they even need special small group courses in Primary Schools.

Why the explosion in cases of anxiety?

I'm a minister not a psychologist.

But I would pretty confidently say that there are two major factors.

There may be more.

#1. Broken relationships.

Kids that grow up in family situations

that are not stable are going to be more anxious.

It makes sense, doesn't it?

Having both of your parents there for you

in a stable and loving home is going to make a kid feel secure.

Kids who feel secure are less likely to suffer from anxiety.

#2 Social media.

Back in the day,

bullying at school finished at 3.30pm when you went home.

These days kids are on their devices till the early hours of the morning.

And the often feral nature of their interactions with each other are without doubt contributing to anxiety.

So what resources are in the Bible that might help with mental illness?

That's probably too big a subject for one sermon.

So I'm going to narrow it down a bit.

What do you do when the Bible tells you to do something that because of your mental health is impossible for you right now?

So I want you to imagine that you suffer from anxiety.

For some of you,

you won't have to imagine.

You can be yourself.

Others can image.

And you read our first reading.

"Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life,

what you will eat or drink,

or about your body, what you will wear.

Is not life more than food,

and the body more than clothes?"

How are you feeling as you hear those words?

Jesus is telling me not to worry.

I'm in a constant state of worry.

I can't stop.

If I try to stop worrying,

I just worry about how much I'm worrying.

Maybe I'm a really bad Christian.

I can't do the things that Jesus tells me to do.

Maybe I'm not a Christian at all.

Maybe I won't go to heaven.

Now I'm worrying about whether I'm going to heaven.
But Jesus says don't worry.
Can you see that this could be a really problematic passage
for a person suffering from anxiety?
OK then, what can they do with it?

First of all, let's take a step back.
The first word of our reading is "Therefore".
Whenever you see the word therefore,
what should you ask?
"What is it there for?"
Jesus wouldn't say therefore
unless this followed on from something else.
What comes before?
"No one can serve two masters.
Either you will hate the one and love the other,
or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.
You cannot serve both God and money."
So when Jesus says this stuff about worry,
he's not addressing people suffering with anxiety.
He's addressing people who are tempted to spend all their time
worrying about how they are going to get rich.
These people are obsessing about fancy food and drink.
They are lying in bed at night
dreaming about a new Louis Vuitton handbag.
They want to tread the earth in a shining pair of RM Williams boots.
And Jesus is saying,
"Don't worry about all that stuff.
Look God looks after food for the birds.
He looks after clothes for the flowers.
You don't need to stress yourself about getting rich."

Hopefully, if you suffer from anxiety,
that's a helpful bit of context.
Jesus is not talking to me at this point.

At least he may be talking to me
with regard to my attitude towards my money.
But he's not talking to me about my suffering from anxiety.
He's not condemning me because I feel anxious.
He's quite rightly trying to get people to focus on God instead of stuff.
And the conclusion is,
6:33 "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,
and all these things will be given to you as well."
If you concentrate on putting God first,
he will look after the rest of your needs
so you won't have to worry about them.

That's a step back.

The other thing a person suffering from anxiety can do
is look at what Jesus encourages.

6:26 "Look at the birds of the air;
they do not sow or reap or store away in barns,
and yet your heavenly father feeds them.

Are you not much more valuable than they?"

Now of course Jesus was directing that advice
to people who don't think they have enough stuff.

But it actually works quite well
as advice to people suffering from anxiety.

Look at the birds of the air.

I have two options,

I can either step outside my office and look at our pet budgerigar, Puff.

Or I can look out my office window
and look at the rainbow lorikeets eating nectar from the flowering gum.

In either case, the effect is calming.

The birds just do what they are doing.

They aren't in a hurry.

They have no anxiety and watching them causes no anxiety.

It's not a bad way of tuning out of a world that does cause anxiety.

And after watching them for a while,

you may be able to take to heart Jesus' words.

"Your heavenly father feeds them."

It's also true that he cares for them and looks after them.

And Jesus' question,

"Are you not much more valuable than they?"

Well it's still relevant, isn't it?

If God looks after the birds,

and we matter to God so much more than the birds,

then he must care for us.

There is no good reason for anxiety.

What's the worst thing that can happen to a Christian?

You die and get to spend eternity with your loving Father.

It's not so bad actually.

Now of course just because there's no good reason for anxiety doesn't make it go away.

We don't have total control over ourselves.

I fell off my bike about six weeks ago turning right around a corner.

Now I'm nervy every time I go around a right hand turn.

I'm fine turning left.

I can tell my brain that it's fine turning right.

But it doesn't want to believe me.

So what do I do?

I just turn right as fast as I can manage

and trust that in time it will sort itself out.

And if it doesn't, then it's not the end of the world.

I will just be condemned to making slower than usual right hand turns.

It's no big deal.

What if the person with anxiety looks at the birds,

they marvel at how wonderfully God has made them,

they relax as they watch them doing their bird thing,

unhurried and unconcerned,

they reflect on how much more valuable they are to God than the birds, and then they still feel anxiety at the end of it.

Does it matter?

Not particularly.

You note the things that are true.

God does care for me.

He cares for me more than these beautiful specimens of nature.

Probably in time my feelings will catch up to what I know to be true.

But maybe they won't.

If they don't, it's not the end of the world.

I keep taking my medication if that's what I need.

And one day God will take me home
to the place where there is no anxiety.

And I will spend eternity in a relaxed and comfortable
state of gratitude and love and joy.

That's the worst case scenario.

It's not so bad.

Let's turn now to the second passage we read out
from Paul's letter to the Philippians.

This time I'd like you to imagine that you are reading it
through the eyes of a person with depression.

This passage also mentions not being anxious.

But this time we are thinking about depression
just for some variety in the problem we face.

Phil 4:7-10 "Rejoice in the Lord always.

I will say it again: Rejoice!

Let your gentleness be evident to all.

The Lord is near.

Do not be anxious about anything,
but in every situation by prayer and petition,
with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

And the peace of God which transcends all understanding,
will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

If you read this through the eyes of a person with depression,
you can see they may well feel that they are asked to do the impossible.

Rejoice!

You'd have to be kidding me.

Everything feels like an impossibly large effort.
It's as much as I can manage to drag myself out of bed in the morning.
Sometimes I can't even drag myself out of bed.
How can God be telling me to rejoice always?
Once again it seems like we are dealing with a passage
that is asking the impossible for some Christian people.
So how can a depressed person take this passage and cherish it?

Let's start with the word 'rejoice'.
To rejoice is to express joy.
And joy is different from happiness.
Happiness is a feeling.
It makes me happy when the crackle on the roast pork is crackly.
And the flipside is true.
When the crackle on the roast pork is chewy and doesn't crackle,
it's a disappointment.
I was looking forward to it and it didn't deliver.
But it's a fleeting moment in time, isn't it?
By the time I'm eating dessert,
I've forgotten about the crackle on the roast pork.
Happiness is dependent on the situation.
And it comes and goes.
But joy is a response to what God has done for us,
what God is doing for us,
and what God will do for us.
And those things are a constant.
They do not come and go.
What prompted Paul to say, "Rejoice in the Lord always"?
Well he was talking about his co-workers
whose names are in the book of life.
That means their names have been written in the great book
that God refers to on judgement day.
The book that spells out who is saved and will inherit eternal life.
And if your name is there it does not get rubbed out.
If you are inheriting eternal life

that cannot be taken away from you.
That makes joy something solid.
It doesn't change from day to day.
That's why Paul says 'Rejoice in the Lord'.
He doesn't say 'Rejoice in your pork crackle.'
Rejoice in the Lord because what Jesus has done for you on the cross
cannot be taken away from you.
Rejoice in the Lord because what the Holy Spirit is doing in you
depends on the power of God and not on your feelings.
Rejoice in the Lord because your name is written in the book of life
and you are safe on judgement day.

Now the depressed person may well respond
that they aren't feeling any rejoicing.
Ok, you might not be feeling it.
But you could write down some things that you believe to be true.
Do you believe that when Jesus died on the cross
he paid the price for all your sin?
Then write it down.
Do you believe that God is living in you by his Holy Spirit,
that he's changing you to be more like Jesus?
Then write it down.
Do you believe that your name is written in the book of life?
Then write it down.
Do you believe that those things
are more important than your current circumstances?
Are they more important to you than anything else?
If the answers to those questions are 'yes',
then you are rejoicing in the Lord
even if you aren't feeling it.

You might wish
that your feelings would catch up to what you know to be true.
The best way to nudge your feelings
in the direction of what you know to be true

is to focus your mind on those truths.

If you know something is true

but you don't spend any time thinking about it,

it shouldn't be a surprise if it doesn't determine your state of mind.

The very next verse after the section of Philippians we read says this:

"Finally brothers and sisters,

whatever is true, whatever is noble,

whatever is right, whatever is pure,

whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable -

if anything is excellent or praiseworthy -

think about such things."

Over time,

the things you think about will shape who you are as a person.

If you want to be able to rejoice,

then focus your mind on the truths that are a cause to rejoice.

Are there promises

that the person who is facing depression can hold on to?

Yes there are.

There is one in our reading.

After encouraging the Philippians to present their requests to God, Paul speaks out this promise.

4:7 "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Notice what the promise isn't.

It doesn't say that God will make your spirit light

so that you feel like you are floating on the clouds.

The promise is

that your hearts and minds will be guarded in Christ Jesus.

That means that God is going to hold on to you as a Christian and not let you go.

That's an important promise for the person facing depression.

People who are depressed often feel worthless.

Why would God want me?

Well there's a reason that God wants you.

The reason God wants you is because when he looks at you,
he sees the righteousness of Jesus.
God wants you because you are clothed with Christ.
God wants you because the things you are ashamed of
have been erased by the blood of Jesus.
And so this promise is the best promise.
God's peace will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

When you are depressed could you in despair turn away from God?
Hold on to this promise,
"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."
That's a great promise for a person facing depression to hold on to.
It's more important for the depressed person
than someone going along easily in their Christian life.
The person travelling easily
might never have it cross their mind to turn away from Christ.
They might never feel despair.
But the person facing depression might be concerned
about whether they will be able to continue.
Can I keep this up?
It feels like I'm carrying a load of bricks uphill.
And so the promise is sweet.
The peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

The depressed person might still be concerned.
Paul tells the Philippians to present their requests to God.
What if in my depression, I just don't have the energy to pray?
I can't present my requests to God.
Will I miss out on his peace that guards my heart?
I've know depressed people who were in such a pit
that they couldn't pray.
They just didn't have the energy.
But even there,
there are resources available.

One man who faced awful depression got his friends to pray for him.
He couldn't summon the energy to pray at that time.
But his friends could sit with him
and they could lift up his requests to God.
Do you think our generous God would deny his peace to such a child?
Of course not!
God doesn't ration out his peace.
God wants to guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.
He loves his children.

We've spent some time this morning reading two passages
not as they are generally applicable to everyone,
but thinking just about how they might be appropriated
by a person suffering from mental illness.
If you suffer from anxiety,
look at the birds.
God cares for them and he cares even more for you.
You might not feel it straight away.
But it's still true.
And one day he will take you to the home where there is no anxiety.
If you suffer from depression,
Remember that rejoicing is not the same as happiness.
Rejoicing is celebrating what God has done for you in the Lord Jesus.
And that doesn't depend on your circumstances.
And he has promised you his peace
which will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.