

12. *Worrying About Tomorrow*

If God so clothes the grass of the field, which to-day is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O men of little faith?

Matthew 6:25-34

Being worried or taking care?

Taking care for the future is human. At first sight Jesus almost seems to do away with our taking care for tomorrow in the Sermon on the Mount. There we read the following statements: "Who of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his life?" and "Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or drink, what you will wear." Does Jesus want to teach His listeners the careless ways of the vagabond?

The context of these statements produces something different. Caring for the future is not taken away but the horizon has been drastically shifted. Jesus says: "Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well." Food, drink and clothing remain the daily needs of human-beings and even God in heaven knows that and is concerned about it. We, however, have more important matters on our minds. Seeking God's kingdom takes priority over all our daily needs. The tomorrow for which we must provide is further away than today. Jesus teaches us to shift the attention of our concern for the future. He does not abolish our caring of the future, but He teaches us to do it with a forward-looking vision.

Some translations have clouded this somewhat. Through their headings and method of translation the translators then give the impression that Jesus is only speaking about anxiety. As if eliminating nervous and agitated anxiety from our worrying was the only thing that mattered, and that is important to a Christian too. A Christian does his work prayerfully rather than in desperation while handling his eating, drinking and clothing in faith. This point also shows up at the edge of Jesus' instruction

concerning worrying in His fleeting reference to the heavenly Father who knows our earthly needs and takes care of them (32b and 33b). The primary matter in the Sermon on the Mount is something else. Jesus' teaching is not aimed in the first instance against false anxiety but against the false direction of our worrying.

The verb which various translations render "being worried" is in fact a neutral verb which means "being somehow busy with something, concerned with something." Jesus is not talking about the quality of our worry but about the object of our concern. That is very clear in verse 33: "Seek first His kingdom." That is the priority which we must learn.

Jesus has built an enormous tension into the section which leads up to verse 33. He repeats three different times that we should be unconcerned with eating, drinking, and clothing, and again the object to which our worrying should be directed remains unmentioned. Until the final word comes out in verse 33.

The first time we hear the following words: "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 important than food, and the body more important than clothes?" (verse 25). A somewhat shocking formulation of the question. We tend to think that life and body are more important than food and clothing, and therefore we devote so much attention to eating, drinking and clothing because our own life and body are worth it. Nevertheless, Jesus appears to want to direct our concern to matters other than sowing, reaping and storing away (verse 26). But what do life and body really need then?

Unanswered, the question is posed a second time from another standpoint. "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (verse 27). Once again a somewhat confusing question. Even if we are unable to force our bodies to grow, we still have to provide these things to prevent our bodies from collapsing and dying. Jesus, however, wants to consider things other than spinning and weaving (verse 28). What does He want us to do then?

Once again the question remains unanswered. In fact it returns to haunt us for the third time when Jesus picks it up again in verses 31 and 32: "So do not worry, saying 'what shall we eat?' or 'what shall we drink?,' or 'what shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly Father knows

that you need them.” Does Jesus intend to lead us either down the road of asceticism or that of carelessness?

The liberating word finally comes: “Seek His kingdom and His righteousness.” Now it also becomes clear why He built up such a tension first. Left to themselves people become intensely wrapped up in the things of this life: good food and drink, a better house and a career. Each day multi-color advertisements hand out images of the things which we are supposed to worry about according to those who invent them for human consumers. Over and against the overwhelming attention for this life, Jesus has to make very clear to us, penetratingly and shockingly, that we need to aim at something better for life and body.

The beginning of verse 25 (Therefore I tell you) indicates that Jesus is going to give an explanation of striving for treasure in heaven (19-21). The new teaching of Jesus is: paying attention to the heavenly horizon is also the best thing for our earthly body and life.

The best thing for our bodies

Our time remains obsessed with physical health. Jogging keeps us in shape; the environmental movement also creates a demand for uncontaminated food and drink; the quality of food gets a lot of attention; the cosmetics' industry cares for our outward appearance with every means possible. Then that well-cared body can fit perfectly into the image created by the advertisements.

The Bible does not divert our attention from life and body. On the contrary, God created each one for us personally! But Jesus reminds us that we have fallen far behind. He points to the big lead which the animals have. Human beings have to sow, reap and store everything in warehouses the whole year round while birds fly around unconcerned, being nourished directly by God's hand. History shows that men can be able to live this unconcerned as well. Elija once walked through the wilderness for forty days and nights without food and was no worse off for it: God provided for him in the same way that He cares for birds and desert animals. Elija represents an exception. But not an extreme exception. Actually it should be normal that people are not dependent upon their labor and sweat. Today a man is in fact in service to himself: if he does not work, then there is no food. To fill his mouth he has to stoop over a shovel, in whatever

form and enlisting the services of whatever other humans. We are used to that. It seems unavoidable.

But it used to be different. Only in Genesis 3, after the fall into sin, do we read about the necessity for man to work the earth in the sweat of his brow. The struggle against thorns and thistles has been placed like a yoke upon our shoulders. Before the fall man ate and drank from all the trees and streams which the Lord God allowed to grow or flow in the garden, and at the tree of life a man is as free as a bird. Having been present in Paradise Jesus' voice sounds very far away when He speaks about unimagined possibilities. Nevertheless, God will not allow man to remain in a state of servitude. The servant in the field will one day become the king over creation. Sounds from Paradise come blowing in like music for the future here and now. Will not God's children fly even higher than the birds? Will not He place them above the birds in His kingdom of heaven? Being dependent for food and drink our whole lives we can still try to make the best of it. But Jesus points to a better thing: life which is no longer subjected to hunger and thirst. Life in God's Paradise. Worrying about tomorrow for us means first and foremost finding the entrance to that kingdom in which man is free again.

Jesus compares our lives to those of the plants as well. They too are out in front of us. To obtain our clothes we still have to spin and weave. Our life hangs from a silken thread! The spinning wheel doesn't rest even if it has been moved to Taiwan. Man weaves multi-colored clothes for himself, and the most prominent people wear the nicest clothes. Ermine and precious stones are for the king. The luster of Solomon's royal robe must have been dazzling! Yet his robe cannot hold a candle to the colors of a simple flower in the field. Flowers *are* beautiful, people have to *make* themselves beautiful, and yet they still lose the contest. The flowers, however, never spin or weave. They just grow: no clothing industry springs up and no beautician arrives to help. People don't grow like that. We don't know any better.

Nevertheless, we once knew better. There was a time in which man did not need any clothing. His body was not yet really naked. After the fall into sin something changed: people began to be ashamed of themselves before others. The lustre is gone. Shame creeps upwards, and the Lord God teaches man to clothe himself. Although many people today may be proud of their

clothes, the flowers of the field remind us that in reality it's all artificial, not genuinely our own. The nudist culture at the beach seems to signal the end of our culture.

A return to nature is impossible today. Still, a time is coming in which our nature will be culture again. Jesus promises that God, who already decorates the grass of the field so colorfully with flowers, will certainly adorn us. This therefore means that every believer in the kingdom of heaven will leave King Solomon far behind and finally will be able to compete with the beauty of the flowers in the field. Some primitive peoples paint their bodies with bright colors: feeling something is missing, they seem to want to compensate for it. The result is garish and forced. Whoever really wants to care for his body would be wise to turn his gaze to the Paradise of the kingdom of heaven. We know not yet what we shall see there!

In this context Jesus purposely employs the uncommon phrase "O you of little faith." Oftentimes Christians hardly dare to imagine anything in the future. When thinking about body and life, their hope and prayers appear to be limited to a reasonable preservation to this colorless body and a substantial lengthening of its years. The gospel, however, gives us higher expectations. Despite having little imagination concerning a redeemed life, we can certainly dream better things concerning the future. Paul, at the rate, knows that all things in creation, both plants and animals, strain their necks to look towards the time that people will once again be God's children on the earth. For that reason the marketplace of this time should not make us short-sighted: there are better bargains to be found for life and body than eating, drinking and clothing. They must be sought in the approaching kingdom of our God!

The first priority in our lives

When Jesus exhorts us to seek first the kingdom of heaven, He does not intend to say that this kingdom might be unfindable. We don't need to track it down. Jesus has come in order to reveal it. But we have to make an effort to be able to enter it. We must apply ourselves to faith and hope. When we know the right direction, then we still have to go that way and search out the high destination.

Verse 34 summarizes these words: "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow." Our lives must be aimed at God's kingdom

rather than bound up in the worries of this life. Despising our earthly needs of food and clothing is unnecessary as long as we subject all these things to our conscientious search for God's great future in His kingdom of heaven.

"For tomorrow will worry about itself," Jesus says in following. That is to say: the future will arrive all by itself. God knows very well what we need here on earth and He is working on the victory of His kingdom of heaven. Jesus does not say that tomorrow has its own cares. The text reads: "Tomorrow will take care of itself." Tomorrow will worry about itself. This is no statement to make us apathetic (there is something everyday to keep you busy), but a word which gives us peace: the future will work out all right.

Now we can also understand the surprising conclusion to verse 34: "Each day has enough wickedness of its own." We purposely use the word wickedness here. Jesus is not speaking about the troubles of each day, of which there are of course many, but He is talking about the sins of every day. Surprisingly enough, a text which offers perspective for liberated human life suddenly ends in the deep valley of human wickedness. That is not really very strange though. We still have to *seek* the kingdom of God, and why do we have to look so hard even though it is close by? Because we have to overcome the powerful resistance of unbelief and our predisposition to all kinds of sins. The evilness of our own nature forms the great counter-current to searching for the kingdom of heaven. We should be very concerned about that. We have our work cut out for us. Without daily struggle against ourselves and our bent towards egotistic or dishonest words and deeds, we will not be able to persevere in the faith. That means: we will never reach the sought after kingdom of heaven.

The forward-looking gaze in our interest for body and life demands energetic action today. We would rather begin the struggle against sin tomorrow. But that is precisely the great worry for today. Whoever really wants to live and get himself into shape, can leave the worries about the future to God. He can concentrate on fighting sin in the day in which he lives. What appears to be a detour is in fact the only way to obtain a world where man will finally display the glory of God's creation. Man, although today the vilest thing in the world and causing pain to fellow man and environment, was nevertheless made as the zenith of creation. Jesus is returning there with His disciples too!