

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole
Christmas Day (C)
Tuesday, December 25, 2018

Titus 2:11-14 | Psalm 96
Luke 2:11-14 | John 1:1-14

As we celebrate Christmas this year, our prayers have been requested – by a US Commander who emailed me from the Middle East – for all serving personnel separated from their families this Christmas and particularly, at this moment, for those in northeast Syria who are being withdrawn at great speed from the area. Such rapid withdrawals carry a very high risk so we pray for all those involved. Our prayers are also asked for the local regional forces who have fought beside us there for some time, and who now, must carry on alone without our support.

A kind parishioner sent me this example of the stiff upper lip of a previous and great generation. They are some additional rules made by the Richmond Golf Club in Surrey, Southern England during the Second World War in 1940.

1. Players are asked to collect bomb and shrapnel splinters to save these causing damage to the mowing machines.
2. In competitions, during gunfire, players may take cover without penalty for ceasing play.
3. A ball moved by enemy action may be replaced, or if lost or destroyed, a ball may be dropped not nearer the hole without penalty.
4. Finally, my favorite – “A player whose stroke is affected by the simultaneous explosion of a bomb may play another ball from the same place. Penalty, one stroke.”

Clearly, flinching at the sound of an explosion was considered understandable, but felt to be less than what should be expected of a truly committed golfer of the day! Such things should not worry the truly stout of heart!

Are you a worrier? Are you a born worrier? Do you think over and over the problems of your life, your family, your relationships, your children, your work? Is Christmas a source of worry? The right presents for the children, maintaining the peace at family gatherings, that piece of work that is not yet done but has to be before you go back to work?

As a priest, I come across a lot of worrying. Some of it good productive worrying. A lot of it just painful exhausting worry to no good end.

I suppose, if you were asked what mental disorder assails the most people in American society today, most of us would probably answer depression. According to statistics produced by the National Institute for Mental Health, in 2015 approximately 16.1 million American adults, or about 6.7 percent of the U.S. population age 18 and older in a given year, had a serious depressive episode in the past year. Surprisingly though, this much, much less than those who suffer in the US from anxiety disorders.

Anxiety disorders include panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and phobias (social phobia, agoraphobia, and specific phobia). Approximately 19.1 percent of adults in the U.S. have a moderate or serious anxiety disorder.

That is almost one fifth of the population, nearly 66 million people!

Who would have thought it, you are more than three times as likely to be clinically anxious than you are to be clinically depressed. Now that really is depressing isn't it!

We do worry a lot though don't we? And what is worry? Worry is a type of fear isn't it? We worry because we are fearful of consequences and outcomes.

As Christians, we know we should be driven by love, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear," says St John.¹

Yet, if we are honest, how many of our choices and actions and thoughts are prompted by anxiety rather than love?

The Irish poet and novelist Ciaran Carson wrote this about this nagging fear, and its grand and petty scope of concern.

Fear

I fear the vast dimensions of eternity.
I fear the gap between the platform and the train.
I fear the onset of a murderous campaign.
I fear the palpitations caused by too much tea.
I fear the drawn pistol of a rapparee.
I fear the books will not survive the acid rain.
I fear the ruler and the blackboard and the cane.
I fear the Jabberwock, whatever it might be.
I fear the gremlins that have colonized my brain.
I fear to read the small print of the guarantee.
And what else do I fear? Let me begin again.

Worry, anxiety does have that loop-like quality doesn't it? We no sooner worry through a problem, rehearse our arguments, responses and actions than we find ourselves beginning again at the very same beginning.

When I was an Army Chaplain a book called "The Chimp Paradox" by Dr. Steven Peters became very popular in the training world. In it he creates a simplified model of the brain. All of us, he says, have three brains. A human brain that reasons and makes moral choices; a chimp brain that, like a chimp in the jungle, constantly scans for threats and is ready to run or fight at a moment's notice; and, finally, a computer that doesn't think as such, but is very fast. This the brain that plays the piano once you have spent some years learning to play. You play without having to think about every single key because much of the activity has become automatic.

The key to understanding your brain, in Peter's model, is to realize that the chimp brain is five times stronger than the human brain. When everything is fine the chimp goes to sleep, but as soon as there is a threat it wakes up and takes over. You experience it when someone cuts in front of you in traffic and irrational anger makes you want to punish the culprit for his rudeness – nothing too drastic, just to drive

¹ John 4:18

behind him with your horn blaring for a couple of minutes or to ram him from behind and push him off a bridge into the Potomac River! It is the chimp that, when you are waiting to get up and speak in public, starts jumping up and down and warning you of every possible disaster and humiliation that is likely to befall you if you stand up in front of all these people and open your mouth.

The chimp, is not your enemy in fact. He can save your life when a real threat happens and, if you can get him working hard on something you need done, he has five times more energy than your human brain does. It is, Peters, explains, all about managing your chimp. You need him, but you don't want to be ruled by him. He is strong, but not very bright or civilized or morally subtle. He is also the born worrier in you. His job is always to be worrying, watching for anything that might harm you both. It is your job to reassure him, care for him, and calm his fears where they are unfounded and irrational. If you are in charge he is your best friend. Let him be in charge when he shouldn't be, and he is your worst and most embarrassing relation who lets you down at every social gathering!

As we bring our lives and joys and worries and kneel before the Creche this Christmas, like the shepherds and Mary, we are at first very afraid. For what can the God, who sees inside our hearts and minds, possibly see in us that is good? What can he make of the chaotic and fearful jungle that we barely manage to hide from the rest of the world but that we know only too well lives in us? Our chimp is terrified of a power and a goodness that can only spell humiliation, punishment, and rejection for us. How can the outcome of such a divine encounter possibly end well for the likes of us?

But the message of the angels, while frightening at first, points us to the one thing of which we cannot be afraid. A child struggling in the straw in whose eyes are all the light and life and gentleness of God.

If this is God, if this is how God comes to us and to the world, then what is there to fear? We are undone. All our pride and self-seeking and struggle to be the strongest or the richest or the best dissolves. And all our worries fade next to the realization that God so loved the world and us, that he came in this holy child, not to conquer or judge and defeat, but to reconcile and save. Here, truly, love casts out fear. For how can we be afraid when we see God's nature revealed in this amazing setting aside of power and majesty and authority in favor of the request and free offer that is this piece of exalted humanity and humbled divinity in the manger?

“And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.”

200 years ago this very day, prayer and praise and worship to God was first offered in this congregation. Perhaps the magic of the historic moment goes largely past us. After all, what is it to us what they did then? Still less, what was it to them what we do now? And yet, if we think about it, we would not be here today. This church, this affectionate community, this precious part of our lives, that some of you have grown up and grown old with, would not be here were it not for that first Christmas in 1818 and if the people, (no doubt a little strange looking and alien to us if we were to see them now) had not poured their faith, their hard earned substance and their love into making this something out of nothing. Of course we would all probably be somewhere. I dread to think where, good Lord one of the St John's Episcopal Churches in the area perhaps!! We would be somewhere, but we would not be here.

It might also occur to us that, in two hundred years' time, if we do not do as they did, the loving and faithful community we pray will still be worshipping in this sacred space, might also not be here then.

That is lesson of the historical moment. It seems all about other people long ago, but really it is all about us and what we do now.

That great task, the great commission, is to live without fear, by learning to trust in this gift of the Incarnation, this God who puts himself into our rough and sinful hands. No matter what life throws at us, and life can throw a very great deal at us at times, we may let our worries fade in the light that comes to us in the eyes of this holy child. We may even give ourselves permission to take a penalty stroke or two at the explosions that life throws at us. We may also comfort our chimp and reassure him that, whatever lurks in the jungle, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that can tear us from God's hands, or the gift he gives us this day from our own.

A holy, blessed, worry free, and Merry Christmas to you all.