

Twenty-seventh Sunday *per annum*
Year A, 2026

Is 5:1-7 Phil 4:6-9
Ps 80 Mt 21:33-43

Have no anxiety at all

In our second reading, again from St Paul's letter to the Philippians, passages from which we have read over the past couple of weeks, the Apostle tells the little flock of Christians in Philippi to "*have no anxiety at all.*" Now when we read this and hear the word anxiety, it may seem to us a rather modern concept.

But it is not the case that anxiety is a contemporary problem. Anyone who reads the scriptures attentively and thoughtfully will not fail to be astonished at the prevalence of anxiety, worry, and fear in the scriptures, not only the Lord's admonitions against them, but also in the complaints and prayers (especially notable in the Psalms) of those who suffer from anxiety and who seek to be delivered from the crippling restlessness and weariness, the despondency and despair that anxiety can bring.

Anxiety, then, is not a uniquely contemporary concern. Rather, it is a universal, human concern. A concern, as we shall see, that touches upon the human body, mind, and spirit.

So let's begin with the word itself, anxiety. We get the word anxiety from a Latin word that means to choke or to squeeze. In its origins this word connotes something tight, constricted, narrow, choking, squeezing, or strangling, and therefore painful and tormenting.

The ancients must have known the phenomenon of anxiety well and had experience of what we now call panic attacks, which are accompanied by a tightness and squeezing in the chest, as the afflicted person, in pain and panic, struggles to breathe through airways that feel constricted and narrow. The word anxiety, then, describes the effects that anxiety has on the human body.

The cause of anxiety, though, is not somatic; it is not found in the body, but in the mind, which is especially affected by the emotions. The mind and the emotions together make up the psyche. And so anxiety has a psychological component – both mental and emotional. Here is where we encounter other words akin to anxiety and often used interchangeably with anxiety: angst, concern, disquiet, distress, foreboding, unease, worry, and so on. These words refer to a state of mind or an emotional state that is bordering on fear. There is this distinction, however, often made by philosophers and psychologists: *fear* is a short-lived response to an immediate, present, and specific threat, while *anxiety* is a long-acting response to a broad and diffuse threat, one that lies in the future and is uncertain.

And that distinction also plays out in the scriptures. We know this because we've heard so many times how the Lord admonishes his people not to be afraid. "*Be not afraid,*" he tells us. "*Do not fear. It is I. I am with you. Take courage.*" But the scriptures also tell us not to worry or to have anxiety. Even in the scriptures, *fear* is mostly aligned with a certain, specific, and present danger that threatens

to overwhelm, while *worry* or *anxiety* is mostly aligned with a general and future threat that in reality is uncertain.

In our passage from the letter to the Philippians, it is the Greek word *merimnao* that is translated as anxiety. St Paul uses this word seven times in his letters, twice in Philippians and five times in 1 Corinthians. But can you guess who uses this same word – which is variously translated as worry, cares, or anxiety – upward of dozen times in the gospels? The Lord Jesus himself. Let's take only the gospel of St Matthew as an instance. In the space of only ten verses (Mt 6:25-34), Jesus, in the sermon on the mount, uses this word five times, driving home his point. You know the passage well. But listen closely, attentive to the concept of anxiety:

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, **1. do not worry** about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is life not more than food and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more important than they? ²⁷ Can any of you **2. by worrying** add a single moment to your life-span? ²⁸ Why are you **3. anxious** about clothes? Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. ²⁹ But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them. ³⁰ If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith? ³¹ **4. So do not worry** and say, ‘What are we to eat?’ or ‘What are we to drink?’ or ‘What are we to wear?’ ³² All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly Father knows that you

need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides. ³⁴ 5. Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil.

The scriptural examples can be multiplied over and over, but there isn't the time to list for you every word and concept and scripture passage that deal with anxiety. Yet I wanted to read aloud this passage from St Matthew's gospel, because in it we see the origin of St Paul's teaching. Paul is only echoing the words of the divine Master, the Lord Jesus, who commands his disciples, us of little faith, not to worry.

And this takes us to the spiritual dimension of anxiety. At its root, anxiety is a symptom of our forgetfulness of the goodness and providence of God. Jesus is trying to ground his listeners in the truth, in the reality that God is present, and near, and loving, while reminding us that our fears and worries and anxieties are far off, and in the future, and uncertain. God clothes mere grass with beauty and splendor, and this is his gracious will. If God does this for grass, the Lord is telling us, don't you think that he will do even more for you, who in his eyes are worth more than many sparrows (Mt 10:31)?

All that is future and uncertain can become the object of worry and anxiety. Will there be enough to eat and drink? Will I have clothes to wear? What about my health or my retirement or my children or my grandchildren? What about storms or crime or the economy or

wars? What about elections or political stability or civil discord or whatever ... and the list goes on, because the anxious mind, having forgotten the goodness and nearness and providence of God, can turn even the most trivial concern into something terrifying and nightmarish.

Which is why Jesus was at pains to point out how his heavenly Father does not fail to provide ... for the grass, for the little birds, and if for grasses and birds, then even more so for those whom he made in his own image and likeness. Do not worry. Do not be anxious, just ask prayerfully and trustingly for what you need here and now. Your heavenly Father knows that you need these things, even before you ask.

Or as St Paul put it in our passage from Philippians: *“in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”* At its root, you see, this passage from Philippians is St Paul’s iteration of Jesus’ sermon on the mount. What Jesus says – to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness – St Paul restates in other words: *“whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”* Seek these things, Paul is saying, for they belong to the kingdom of God. Do this, St Paul is saying, and then the *God of peace* will be with you.

The scriptural message from the Father, given through prophets and angels, through apostles and evangelists, and even through the Son himself, not to fear, not to worry, not to be anxious is repeated so often because – weak as we are, of such little faith as we are, so slow to believe as we are – we have not yet learned who God is and what are his ways with us. To our shame and dismay, we forget that God is good and compassionate. We forget that God is loving and kind and comes to the help of those who trust in him. And so we have no peace. Instead, we have worries, anxiety, and panic attacks.

Because we cannot see the future, which to us is uncertain and threatening and overwhelming, we imagine that the future cannot be known or managed, and so we worry, spinning our minds, desperately trying to figure out how things will come to pass, ruminating fearfully on all that is unsure and uncertain, as if our mental and emotional handwringing could actually accomplish something and bring us peace. But we will have no peace, unless and until we abandon ourselves in childlike simplicity to the care and providence of the heavenly Father, entrusting to him all our worries, and anxieties, and fears, however stubbornly we might wish to hold on to them. Unless we become like little children, carefree and dependent, in loving and absolute trust in the power of their parents to provide for every need, even those needs of which they are not aware, then we will not enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt 18:3).

We cannot perceive with any clarity or certainty what lies ahead in the future. Only God can do this. Hence, God alone can provide and does provide for those who love him and seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. God, though, sees ahead, things both near and far. God sees all things, knows all things, loves all things, and provides all things in every way for his own, for those who, with childlike confidence, trust in his goodness alone and receive from him their daily bread.

And so we pray:

Deliver us, Lord, from every evil, graciously grant peace in our days, that, by the help of your mercy, we may be always free from sin and safe from all distress, as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.