

Why Worry?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 1st October 2023

A Reflection by Rev Bill Thomas

Season of Creation 5A

**Contemporary Reading: *A Trip to Mount General in Late Winter*
by Huang Fan; Matthew 6: 25-34.**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

I am sure most of us have had some sort of mountain experience. Mountains are good places to clear our minds and, to not only see great distances, in a literal sense, but also to see life in other perspectives. This is a common thread that links our two readings today: *A trip to Mount General* and today's gospel from Matthew 6 which is part of the Sermon on the Mount.

Huang Fan's poem has its central focus on the interaction of the traveller and the natural world. The poet puts the reader in the spotlight with the use of the second person, you. He is turning his trip into your trip. *"Maybe the mountains and plains make arrangements. Or maybe the wrong road has something to do with you. Have you just lost your way by accident, or has the natural world, the conspiring mountains and plains lured you into a trap, or is it your own doing?"*

As you travel with the poet up the mountain path you are struck by the beauty, yet awed. Your self-confidence is challenged, you are unstable. You can turn around if you like and look back at the plain, and prove yourself calm. But is that illusory? The mountain still looms behind you.

There is hope nevertheless. Winter is over. The soil holds seeds now germinating and in the bamboo grove you can forget yourself. Then there is the image of water flowing beneath the frozen ice of a river. An image of the continuity of life.

The text from Matthew also uses nature images, as a way to show God's love for all creation, of which we are a part. However the main focus of this teaching is: *"do not worry."* Or: *where do we put our trust?* Our own strength, that leads us to lying awake worrying - or trusting in God.

Some years ago when we were living at Wentworth Falls, Ruth and I planned to have an anniversary dinner at the Hydro Majestic at Medlow Bath. The waiter came for our order and as we named each dish he said *"No worries."* When asked whether he was going to write it down, he said again *"No worries!"* An hour passed and no meal had arrived. The couple at the next table were also waiting. They were nice people from Mudgee, also having a celebration of some sort. We had a great chat.

Eventually we made enquiries. No-one seemed to know what we had ordered. Eventually we got something which could be prepared quickly and offered free wine, but it did not appear.

Ruth wrote 2 letters and eventually we were offered a free dinner. This time the unworried waiter was not on the scene. Two weeks after the free feed the Hydro went bust and closed. The last straw perhaps.

"No worries" is rather an annoying phrase isn't it?

"Thank you for your help." *"No worries."* Not *"You're welcome"* or *"It's a pleasure"* but: *"No Worries."* ?!

To me this de-values both the "thank you", but also whatever it was that prompted the "thank you."

It's a bit like people being on the phone at the supermarket check-out, ignoring the person who is serving them. Those of us who live alone grab the chance for a conversation whenever we can. Most of the young people working the check-outs are at school or Uni and it is interesting to learn about what they are studying. I gain from this and I hope they are encouraged.

I spoke to one man last week and no, he was not studying but he is an actor/producer running an outfit called Death House Productions which runs walking tours around Kings Cross and Darlinghurst and puts on performances in the Crypt of St. James Church. I was reminded that if your passion is the arts, you will probably have to work on a checkout to pay your bills.

These fleeting interactions may seem unimportant, but in fact they are both mutually enriching but also an essential part of social cohesion. It is putting a value on people and their work.

Worrying about stuff doesn't solve anything. But don't we do it all the time? As Jesus said, you can't add an hour to your life by worrying.

Did you know, by the way, that Australian Bureau of Statistics has a table to work out your life expectancy at any particular age. Put in your gender and date of birth and press the button. I learnt that my use-by date is June 6, 2030. I'll start worrying on June 5, 2030.

If anything, worrying will possibly take time off your life. But we do it all the time, don't we? I lie awake at night worrying about the referendum and where will we be as a nation if the referendum fails. I worry about climate change and its impact on my great-grand children aged 9 and 12. I am sure you all have the same concerns for family members and all the young people on the planet.

When Jesus said *"do not worry"* it was not the trivial *"no worries."* He is saying there is no point in worrying about the essentials of life, such as what we will eat or drink, or our appearances such as what we will wear. The striving for material things will wear us down, but rather *"strive first for the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*

Jesus is saying that God cares for all the created things. Birds, lilies, grass are all important. And more beautiful than what people can make. The lily is more beautiful than Solomon's lavish robes.

And people, as part of this Creation, matter. God knows what our needs are. Our needs, not all the extra things we might want, or think we need, but our needs. There is a big difference between what we need to have and what we want to have. For some of us, our income exceeds our needs. The challenge then is what we do with what is surplus to our needs. If we look at this teaching from a social justice perspective then it is saying that human needs are simple: food, clothing, drink are the examples given.

All people have the right to an adequate diet, clean water supply, clothing, housing. We can add to that education, health care, employment. Isn't this what the Voice is about?

"Strive first for the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

That is a very nice saying, that is if you have a roof over your head and food to eat and clothes to wear. But taken at face value, cruel and mocking if, for example, you are a refugee fleeing the conflict in Yemen. Or a homeless woman living in a car in Sydney. We know that Jesus was acutely aware of the plight of poor people around him in his time, so we need to look a bit deeper.

"No worries, she'll be right mate." That is do nothing and hope for the best. Or *"strive first for the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness"*. The Kingdom of God, or can we call it the Community of God, is not some vague spiritualised non-place. It doesn't just happen. It won't happen unless we strive for it.

In the words of Micah 6: 8 *"What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."*

And there is something else about worrying. When we worry, it might be about things that have happened in the past. Grievances perhaps. Or regrets. Or we worry about things that might happen. Health, or paying bills, or work or family concerns. I am not devaluing any of this. But what it does do is to drag us out of the present moment. Our life is like a leaf floating down a stream. Our life is lived moment by moment. If we are always living in the past or the future then we actually are robbing ourselves of life. Our life only exists in the present.

For example, on Wednesday morning, I was with others giving out Vote YES fliers at Hornsby station. Lots of interesting inter-actions. Went and had breakfast and missed the train back to Turrumurra by one minute. What a break that was. On the platform were two young mothers who turned out to be sisters with three little kids between them. One girl, who is one, already walking and talking (in one year old language, but clearly aware of what language is for), approached me, smiles and chatter. A great moment missed if I had come two minutes earlier.

"Whoever becomes humble like this child is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven." That was my Kingdom of God moment that day.

Since 2016, I have been walking with my dear wife Ruth on her journey with dementia. Dementia has many shapes and each story or journey is different. Short term memory loss is a common factor. Short term memory loss is actually a misnomer. What is happening is the failure of a part of the brain known, as the hippocampus, to turn current experience into longer term memory. Existing long term memory doesn't immediately go, although over time it fades. Long term memory is like a photo album. Not being able to turn immediate experience into memory is like trying to take photos with no film in the camera. Ruth knows me when I visit in the morning but when I visit again in the afternoon she has no memory of my morning visit, or her sister's visit on Monday or our grandson's visit on Sunday.

On this walk with dementia I have learned the value of living in the present moment. Because if I want to be where Ruth is and to share life with her, that is where I am to be. Our experience of dementia has, perhaps, been gentler than many other people's. Ruth is content, always seems happy and the five years since Ruth has been living at Hammond Care have had much richness. Until about this time last year Ruth could transfer from wheel-chair to car and so we could visit family, have picnics, go to the movies. Now our life has become more limited, but we still have good times.

Over the past weeks, like many of you I have been heavily involved in the YES campaign. We have been part of a movement that has brought people together from many backgrounds, and across faiths as at the World Peace Day gathering we hosted.

I have been part of a wonderful team of people in the Upper North Shore. This is what seeking the Kingdom of God is about. Jesus' images of the Kingdom of God were homely ones. A farmer sowing wheat. A woman baking bread. People fishing.

We have been knocking on doors, meeting people in parks, shopping centres and at train stations as we hand out vote YES fliers. I have had quite a few Kingdom of God moments. Last Saturday it was a young couple, happy to support us. They had their 5 week old baby. The Kingdom of God is like a mother with her first born. Full of joy and hope.

Best Kingdom of God moment for me was when we were handing out fliers at Asquith Station. Three Year 12 girls from Asquith Girls High came by. All supporters, but only one could vote. It was their last day at school, so they had all gone down to Newport Beach to watch the sun rise. The Kingdom of God is like three bubbly girls. Full of hope, welcoming a new day and a new chapter in their lives.

To return to Huang Fan's poem. "*Winter is over. In the soil are the buried greetings waiting to germinate.*" Green shoots coming up as the seeds come to life. Are there other buried greetings that come when our coldness of heart is warmed? To give it an Australian context think of bushland after a fire has been through. Blackened eucalypts, seemingly dead, spring green shoots along the trunks and branches. This carries the message of hope when everything seems hopeless.

Seek first the Kingdom of God.

A few weeks before our grand-daughter gave birth to her first child in 2011 she invited relatives and friends to write a greeting or a blessing for the child. Her invitation took me back to 1993. This was just before she herself was born and I was visiting my son and his partner, the soon to be parents, at the small block of land they had bought at Upper Eden Creek, near Kyogle. They were embarking on an alternative life style and were living in a caravan while Simon built a very simple home.

I wandered down to the creek and sat there reflecting on the beauty of where I was and on the thought of becoming a grand-parent. So this is what was in my mind as I wrote this blessing for the soon to be born great-grandson.

I would like to conclude our Season of Creation by sharing what I wrote. May my hope for the child, Liam, be also a blessing and hope for all the children in our lives.

A Blessing Wish for my Great-Grandson

A few months before your mother was born I sat one day beside Upper Eden Creek, the place of your mother's first home.

I was looking into a pool. Trees and clouds were reflected in the clear still water. Within the water there were small living creatures.

This was the pool of life that you are now entering. Up-stream a small water-fall fed the pool. This was the place of new life.

As I sat there my thoughts were for the new child to be born, your mother.

Downstream, the pool disappeared out of view. A small creek would flow into a river and at last into the great ocean.

I thought of my own life, which would flow at last from the little pool, into the creek, the river and into the great ocean of life.

And as I sat by the pool, I thought with joy of the coming of my first grand-child, your mother.

And then, I wondered, would I live to see another generation, before I moved from the pool to the great ocean?

With joy I await your coming.

Welcome, little child, to the pool of life. May your time here be full of joy and fulfillment. May you be nurtured by your caring family and grow to be a man of compassion and courage. May you know the love of those around you and give love in return.

May you have the greatest of all blessings which is yourself, to be a blessing to others.

Your loving Great-grandfather.

May 1, 2011.

Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. AMEN