

Mt. 6: 24-34; Isaiah 49: 8-18
May 25 2008—Pentecost III
Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, Paris
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Today we have the famous passage from the Sermon on the Mount, with the lilies of the field who neither toil nor spin and yet are clothed more grandly than King Solomon, and the verse, "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." A famous passage, perhaps, but one often considered to be impractical, even utopian.

When I was a boy, I became enamored of a satirical review known as *Mad Magazine*. How many of you know this magazine? For those of you who don't, *Mad's* cartoon satires of pop culture are more lowbrow than *Le Canard enchaîné*. Its largest-selling issue ever had a parody of the film *The Poseidon Adventure* called "The Poop-side down Adventure," and its review of the first *Star Trek* series was entitled, "Starship Boobyprize." You get the idea...

The mascot of *Mad Magazine* is a fellow with a moon face, red hair and freckles, disturbingly arranged eyes and an idiot grin, saying "What, me worry?" Only imbeciles are free from worry, it would seem. About the same time I discovered *Mad*, there was a film playing called *Doctor Strangelove*. Many people forget that the full title was *Doctor Strangelove, or, How I learned to stop worrying and love the Bomb*. In those days everyone was worried about Mutually Assured Destruction, or MAD, as the result of a nuclear war. Of course you should worry with a sword of Damocles hanging over your head. Unless you're an imbecile...

(As if today things are less worrisome...)

But I think that in order to understand Jesus' teaching correctly we first need to differentiate between planning and worrying. My father-in-law Robert McCulloch (God rest him), when he heard of my idea to go off to seminary to become a priest, asked me how this was to be paid for: "the lilies of the field"? By which he meant, did I plan merely to expect God to rain down manna upon me to make it happen?

This is not what Jesus is saying. We need to plan, to be prepared for contingencies and to make and achieve our goals. Planning is about developing your responses to possible situation, as well as making things

happen. Our Dean and Vestry here at the Cathedral just did an in-depth architectural study--planning for the future, caring for the buildings but above all planning to make our facilities even better equipped to do ministry in the future. Some of these ministries don't exist yet, and are still undreamt. When the building plans are complete, the capital campaign to pay for the improvements will also be planned. It will be very exciting.

But what if no one was planning? What would happen to our buildings, our parish and its ministries? The old saw is true: "Failing to plan is planning to fail."

They also say that if you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans. Part of planning, Jesus is saying, is focusing on what's most important. And what is most important in your life and mine is that our relationship with God. We were born with God; we will die alone with God. Every other relationship ends except that one, although I believe we will rediscover the people we love but see no longer. The future belongs to God, Jesus is saying. Act like it, and everything else will fall into place.

I have a favorite story that illustrates this to me. There's an old story about a man condemned to death for treason. After the king pronounces sentence, the man cried out, Give me a year, Your Majesty, and I will teach Your Majesty's favorite stallion to sing. The King, outraged by his effrontery, replies, "For your insolence, instead of the quick and painless death you have brought upon yourself, you will die a slow and terrible death. You have a year to worry about it."

As he's being led to his cell in the stable, his friends ask him, "What are you doing? Are you crazy? You'll never teach that horse to sing. You'll die horribly!"

The prisoner replies, "I have a year. Much can happen in a year. The King could die. I could die. The horse could die. Or, the horse might learn how to sing."

The future, you see, really does belong to God.

Worrying, on the other hand, is not planning. It is feeling in advance the pain of what might happen. What if my child does something really stupid, and hurts herself? What if I get sick? What if I lose my job? As Mother Barbara Crafton says—incidentally, our new interim rector at St James, Florence—worrying is like the man who always carries a bomb onto a

plane because the odds of two people carrying a bomb onto a plane are so impossibly low.

You can't change a thing by worrying about it. "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" So don't try, says Jesus. "Today's trouble is enough for today. Or the French translation: "*À chaque jour suffit sa peine*". "Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof," King James' men translated it, and worrying itself is indeed evil. It inflicts pain, suffering, trouble upon us for no other reason than what *might* happen.

Today's evil is sufficient to the day. Or as they say in AA, one day at a time. It is the only way any of us can live, today, in the present, and we have enough pain to deal with without adding more imagined pain from things which haven't happened yet.

In other words, Alfred E. Neuman is subversive—who's the idiot here, after all? "What, me worry?" is actually a very wise attitude.

So how do we stop worrying? Well, I am a bishop, and as such I have a lot of congregations to worry about. You call on the bishop when there's a problem to be fixed. And usually, things are out of my control. Which is to say that I am tempted to be as big a worrier as anyone else.

So I have learned to pray a simple prayer when things at church get overwhelming (and I recommend it highly to the Dean and the Curate): "God, this church thing was *your* idea, not mine—*you* deal with it!" And I imagine bundling up my worries and literally lifting it over my head, like a barbell, for God to reach down and grab it from me. And this is what I recommend to you. Imagine all your worries. Don't make a list and go over it. All that will happen is you'll stop praying and start worrying again. Instead, imagine a bundle or a pile or a Dumpster into which you dump your worries. Take the stuff and imagine giving it to God. Stick it in God's hands. Or dump it at God's feet. One person I know said he likes to knock on God's door, drop his bundle of worries, and run!

I am sure you are more imaginative than I, and can come up with other effective images to push worry out of your mind and onto God. It serves no useful purpose. It hurts. It is therefore evil. Give it to God.

Finally, why should we think God would take up the burden of our worries? Today's reading from Isaiah gives us the perfect image. The people say, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." And

God answers through the prophet, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?” (A perfect verse for Mother’s Day, today in France.) “Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.”

So when we lift up our burden of worry to the Lord—or knock at God’s door, drop it and run—we can do so in confidence that God has not forsaken us. God has not forgotten you. Can a good mother ever forsake her child? Can she forget her nursing baby? God has always been with you, from the day of your birth. The Lord will carry your worries away. Today’s troubles are, indeed, enough to deal with. Let God deal with the future—our future belongs to God.