

Reading: Matthew 6:25-34

I think I've shared this before, but today's Gospel reading is one of my favourite passages in the whole Bible. As someone who enjoys bird watching, Jesus' exhortation to "look at the birds of the air" is one of His instructions which I'm all too happy to oblige. It's a passage which has somewhat followed us around as a family, anchoring us through different stages of life. Ellen and I had it as one of the readings at our wedding, as we embarked on the journey of marriage. And it was a verse that God reminded me of when we were wanting to start a family.

And why has this passage been an anchor? – I think it is because God, my Father in heaven, knows that I am naturally a worrier. Especially about the future. I can find myself worrying about future things on the horizon, how I'll deal with them etc.

An example of that, if I'm being completely honest and a little vulnerable for a moment, is what life post-Curacy will be like. Where are we going to be living – will it still be within Coventry Diocese, or will we have to move to a new area? What will it be like for our family; will the schools be okay for Jacob, who will be starting around the time I finish Curacy in 2028? And – and this is probably the one I'm least-confident about – will I be up for the job as a vicar or rector?

And that's when I have to return to this passage. To stop, and to look up. Look up at the birds, and recognise that God, my heavenly Father, cares deeply for them – both the mighty Red Kites, like I saw yesterday hovering above Hatton Park whilst at the park with Jacob; and the little robins, who I saw resting on a branch on the way back home.

And Jesus says that He cares about us, about me, even more. To not worry about what will happen in the future; in 3 years' time when Curacy finishes, in the summer when I'll be ordained as a priest, or even tomorrow on Monday morning. "Tomorrow will worry about itself" – and the same Heavenly Father, who knows what I need and cares for me today, will be with me then.

This is definitely easier said than done – and believe me, this is me preaching to myself as much as it is to anyone else. But when the anxieties come, I've found three things that help to ground me, in God and in His promise to care for us in this passage. They are: (1) look back; (2) look alongside; and (3) look up. I'll briefly unpack each of these in-turn.

(1) Firstly, "look back." I've found it really helpful to look back over my life, and to see the times when I've felt lost and hopeless – and God has provided, and kept us going. An example of this was when Ellen moved to Coventry in 2016. I'd moved the year before to work as an intern at Coventry Cathedral in their peace and reconciliation team, and had a

job lined-up with Together for Change to work with churches to offer a warm welcome and companionship to newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees in the city, to try to foster a sense of belonging. Ellen applied for jobs here in Coventry from Durham where she was living, but got nowhere. She'd been applying for months on end, but rarely received even an acknowledgement, let alone an interview.

By now it was summer; the time she was wanting to move, but with nothing lined-up – and it was impossible to even contemplate securing accommodation until the job side was sorted. I remember asking for prayers for her during our daily Morning Prayer at the Cathedral, and then at the end Kathryn Fleming, one of the Canons at the Cathedral, came up to me and said “God doesn't regularly do this, at least not in my experience; but I think He may have answered your prayer today – and I think He may have stirred my heart to be that answer.” I could feel my heart pumping a little quicker now, and asked her what she was thinking; to which she replied “well, I've got a spare room in my vicarage, and Ellen would be very welcome to come and live with me if she'd like.” Such incredible kindness – especially bearing in mind that she'd never even met Ellen at this point. God, our Father in heaven, miraculously providing.

And then, on top of that, He actually provided an incredibly unexpected answer to prayer – in fact, to a prayer that I wasn't even praying. Which was that my job for Together for Change got unexpectedly delayed. As I'm sure you know, working in the charity sector involves a lot of grant applications, and then waiting for funding bodies to respond. And one of the funds which we had applied to, and had been verbally told we were going to be successful with, pushed their closing date back a month, as they'd received additional funding and wanted to give other charities time to apply.

So September rolls around, when I was expecting to start my job, and the money wasn't all there – so I obviously couldn't. This naturally sent me into a bit of a worry, wondering how long this was going to take etc. And now we're in the situation whereby neither of us have jobs; we're together in Coventry, but that's about it.

And yet, that ended up being the most precious time for us as a couple. Ellen had moved from Durham to Coventry, in a new city in which she didn't know anybody. If I'd then gone straight into working, whilst she was on her own applying for jobs, it would have been an incredibly lonely and difficult time for her. It was a really precious time in terms of helping her to settle into our new life here, and also for our relationship after being long-distance for a year.

And then, incredibly, a job offer came through for her at precisely the same time the funding came through for me – and we started working our new jobs within 24 hours of each other.

It's almost as though there's Someone up there who knows what He's doing...He can even work through funding disappointments, I've discovered.

I want to ask you all: does anybody else has any encouraging stories of God's provision, which you might feel comfortable sharing sometime in church? I know that Ann has mentioned in the past having a time in the service for people to share testimonies, and that's something I'd love us to do. They are such an encouragement for us as the Body of Christ – they don't need to be dramatic, and anything will be such a boost to us all.

(2) And these leads into my second point: to "look alongside." To look at our brothers and sisters in Christ here in our church, and see that we are not alone in our journeys through life. That we are here for one another, both in the joyful and in the challenging times. Paul writes in Galatians 6: *"Carry one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."*

We are not intended to do this journey alone as followers of Jesus Christ. In the story I mentioned earlier, Kathryn obviously hugely helped Ellen in her journey. But it was not just her; I was also massively helped and blessed by a brother in Christ.

As I mentioned, I'd been expecting to start my job in September, and so signed a rental agreement with a friend to let a house together. And then September arrives, and the funding delay means I can't start my job – yet the rent still needs paying. I didn't know what to do.

I told my new housemate, and he said "don't worry about it – I've got enough to be able to cover it for a few months, and then once you start working we can talk about paying it back etc." So he covered the rent, bills etc for a couple of months, until I started work in the November. I received my first paycheque, and asked to sit down with him and figure out the sums for paying him back. To which he replied "don't worry about it. I see it as my contribution to bless you in your ministry; I really believe this is what God has called you into, and I want to support you in that in this way."

I could not have done that ministry in Coventry on my own, without him and his support in that moment. And that's an important reminder for all of us: we need our brothers and sisters in Christ, because we're not intended to do this on our own. Again, Paul has some words of wisdom for us, this time from Ephesians 4: he says that we are the Body of Christ, and *"the whole body is fitted together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing in love."*

That's what we're called to do. All of us have a role to play; our own special part to help one another grow, so that the whole body is growing together full of love.

(3) And finally, to “look up.” Peter writes, “Cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.” You should all have been given a post-it note now and a pen, and what I’d like to encourage you to do is – if you feel comfortable – to write on it anything that you’re feeling worried or anxious about at the moment. It’s not for anybody else, it’s just for God.

If there are any worries that you have, which you would like to bring before the Lord, then when we come up for Communion in a few minutes’ time, please feel free to pray and to throw your post-it note into this basket sat at the foot of the cross. “Cast all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you.” And in this prayerful, physical act, cast that anxiety onto the Lord Jesus.

To conclude, as we go into this week, let’s be reminding ourselves of those powerful words from Psalm 136 which we sang: “His love endures forever.” And if it’s feeling tricky at any point, have a look up: look up for the birds, see them flying and tweeting and doing their thing. And remember that the same God who cares for them, cares for you as well.