

Readings

Is 5:1-7

Ps 80:9,12,13-14,15-16,19-20

Phil 4:6-9

Mt 21:33-43

Gregory D. Heidenblut, O.S.A.
Director of Education and Formation for Priests
Archdiocese of San Francisco

Today in our second reading, St. Paul tells us, “Do not worry about anything” (Phil 4:6). Our initial response might be, “right” and smile. Years ago, if someone told me not to worry, it used to make me upset – how can a person be so blindly optimistic that they imagine bad things can never happen? Well, that is hardly the case with Paul. He faced trials that few of us could conceive. A partial list includes an escape involving being lowered over the side of building in a basket, public whippings, shipwrecks, snake bites, imprisonment, and bodily ailments (particularly, afflictions of the eye). Yet in this letter, written toward the end of his life, he says, “Have no anxiety at all.” He tells the converts at Phillipi how to live in order to enjoy the peace of God.

We need to look at contemporary secular social science that provides evidence that our Christian faith, religious practice, often provides us with greater well-being and better mental health than those who have no faith. An important longitudinal study conducted by the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, known as the Kenita Survey, included 15 researchers in 2007, found that the non-religiously affiliated, had double or triple the amount of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, suicidal ideation, suicide, and anti-social aggressivity, than those with deep Christian faith and religious practices.

All of us would like to be free from worries, but it seems impossible. We have financial problems, family difficulties, work deadlines, health concerns – not to mention worries about what is happening in our world: natural disasters, societal breakdown, wars, economic turmoil and so on. When Paul says to not worry about anything, when Jesus tells us not to be troubled, it does not mean to ignore reality. What it means is that we take a different approach to our troubles.

The recent secular study referenced above provides encouragement to believe our Lord and his apostle, Paul. I want to provide a little confession. I have been a terrible worrier. I worried about what people think about me. I worried about not doing my job properly. As a priest, I hear other people problems and I worry about them! At the same time, I recognized that all my fretting does no good for me or anyone else.

When I analyze my worries, I see that they concern only two days. And I have no control over either of them. The two days are yesterday and tomorrow. The only day I can control is today. Jesus said, “Do not worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil.” (Mt 6:34).

Even Saint Augustine found peace by surrendering himself to God’s love. In the *Confessions* he prays: “You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.” (*Confessions*, X, 27, 38 34), and “Lord, my heart is restless until it rests in You. Draw me back to Yourself and give me Your peace.”

If we could somehow put our anxieties in God’s hand, it would greatly increase our effectiveness in life. A number of years ago, I was at the side of my very dear Augustinian brother, Fr. Bill Sullivan, who was dying. He was trying to enter into the experience of his last

moments on earth and dealing with his pain resulting from cancer. He held my hand for over an hour stating, “Greg, I am not afraid of dying. What frightens me is being away from my brothers (Augustinians). I have been with them most of my life.” Bill was truly living in the present; not yesterday nor tomorrow, but the moment. He relied on Jesus’ promises and was able to comfort himself in Jesus’ words, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Therefore, like St. Paul, he was able not to have anxiety invade his sacred space and sacred time, dying. Fr. Bill was living in the reality of his mortality, facing it head-on, relying on his friend and Savior, Jesus.

No matter what the test, God will take care of you. Those are good words. Now is the moment to say a prayer of abandonment. What a difference it would make if we could place our cares in God’s hand! St. Paul tells us the way:

Brothers and sisters: *“Do not worry about anything,
but in everything let your requests be made known to God
by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving.
And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*