

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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DO NOT WORRY

28th May 2017

Isaiah 43:1-11
1 Peter 5:6-14

Well, we have seen the TGO walkers come through the village for another year. TGO: The Great Outdoor Challenge, which has, since 1980 involved up to 300 people in backpacking by their own routes from the West Coast to the East. They don't all come through our area, of course, but the Corrieyairack Pass is a popular route, and so we see them, with their backpacks and tents, their bedding and supplies all laden on their backs. Every step of the way is to be done on foot, and there is really no route that you can walk across the Northern part of Scotland where you won't have to camp out for at least the occasional night. So they are a pretty well-laden crew.

If you get information, as I do, from Kingussie High School, you will also sometimes see pictures of heavily-laden teenagers as they take on the Duke of Edinburgh's award challenges. The teenagers can take turns carrying the tent they will share, but they need to carry all their food and all they might need for one, two or three nights, and some of the packs seem bigger than their porters. I have done a bit of hiking and camping in my time – some time I will tell you about the days I wandered, slightly lost, in Denali National Park in Alaska, and if you have not, I can tell you that, unless you are very, very experienced, by the time you have worn a full backpack for an hour or two it feels like it might be stuffed with stones. It pulls you down, it drags at your shoulders. It makes every step an effort and sometimes even a nightmare. But don't let me put you off – go off with your backpack by all means!

I am sure that many of the TGO challengers who have passed our doors, while they have been glad to undertake the challenge, each time they stopped, for a meal or for the night, have been more than glad to take off their burdens. They will have thrown them down on the floor or the road or the grass with sighs of pure ecstasy. They will have delighted in the feeling of lightness and freedom which was suddenly theirs. And that is the experience which Peter is talking about when he advises his readers to cast all their anxiety on God, because he cares for them.

It is that word, "cast" which is the defining one. Peter is not talking about slightly lessening the load that we carry. He is not talking about off-loading a little superfluous weight. No he is talking about being weighted down and burdened, almost beyond bearing, and being able to undo the straps and throw off the entire load, not just for an hour or a night, but for good. What a feeling!

The weight that Peter is talking about is not the weight of sin – it might be, others have used that analogy, not least John Bunyan, the writer of "The Pilgrim's Progress". Peter has a different kind of weight in mind; he is talking about the weight of worry. The people to whom he was writing were, as we have seen suffering various trials because of their faith, and they were worried that perhaps they had placed their

hope, had planted that faith in the wrong ground. Maybe following Jesus was not the way. Maybe they were just making their lives worse for no good reason. So they worried.

All of us worry at times. All of us have thoughts which pursue us round and round, and which it seems we cannot escape. We have been going through the worries of examinations in the manse for the past month – just one more to go. And it is a worry for our young people these days, and it is also a worry for their parents, especially if they don't seem to be working, or if doing their best looks different to the way that we would set about doing our best.

People worry about their families, some people almost incessantly. People worry about their health. When I was in the USA, training, I would go to special church services on their Thanksgiving Day, and in them people would often be encouraged to stand up and say what they were thankful for this year. It was nearly always to do with health. Health, or the fear of losing it can be a real worry. People worry about the state of the world, which is a biggie, and one for which there is no cure but Jesus. All kinds of worries, and although some of these things will be transient worries – the exams, for instance – some can make a pattern in our minds, so that they go round and round and there is no getting away from them. Ever.

Don't worry, says Peter. God cares for you. God cares for you. God loves you and understands you, and is concerned about what you are concerned about – but he is able to do something about it. He cares for you. "Do not be afraid," says Isaiah, "For I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name, you are mine."

There is a lot we could worry about. Just this week we have seen the horrific terrorist attack on young people coming out of a harmless concert in Manchester. And while we mourn and pray for those affected in that event, it would be only too easy to worry about it happening elsewhere to the extent that we were too frightened to go anywhere. I always will remember an old lady in my former charge who was housebound. Being housebound she often had the television on for company, not that she could see the pictures very well, being nearly blind, but she could hear it. However, having it so constantly on, she heard the news over and over again, with its grim tale of war and horrors, and she became so afraid that she would not leave her home, even when there was someone to take her. She lived in the quietest little village in the Borders, where the crime rate was certainly zero, if not a minus figure, but she thought that the things she heard so constantly were normative, instead of being reported because they were unusual. Worry had made even more of a prisoner of her than her ailing body.

Cast your care on him, says Peter. That does not mean throwing caution to the winds; it doesn't mean not taking sensible precautions when we go into new situations or strange places. But there is a difference between taking sensible precautions, taking out travel insurance, as we said last week, or looking both ways before you cross the road, or not going into the hills without food, water, warm clothes, a map and compass– there is a difference between taking precautions and being weighed down with care.

Cast your care on God, says Peter because he cares for you. And one more thing – be alert. Worry is one of the devil's tools to get God's people down, so watch out for that faith-sapping attack, and give your care to God.

We don't often talk about the devil, do we? And that is probably right – we don't want to talk more about the powers of evil than about the love of God. We don't want to give them anything like the attention we give God. But here is a little thought which I read this week, which is helpful, and I find is helpful when thinking about the threats of unknown terror which are abroad just now. As society has talked less about God, so it has talked less about the powers of evil as well, call them what you will. And when that happens, when we lose the idea of God and the devil, then you yourself, and your friends, and your party, in politics, and your cause or your country can gradually come to take the place of God in your mind, while, conversely, your enemies take on the role of the devil. Peter's whole letter, on the other hand, has been insisting that the way to respond to attacks of whatever kind is with a firm but gentle faith, treating non-Christians with respect, living within the law (unless it tries to get you to deny Jesus), behaving with patience and humility in all circumstances. You see, our human opponents, however fierce might be the persecution they bring on us, are not the real enemy. There is a real enemy and it may be using them, but they are still people, made, just as we are, in God's image. They are not the enemy, and should not be treated or feared as such.

Peter's readers worried that they had misunderstood, that they had taken up a faith that gave them only suffering. Peter ends his letter, after all his encouragement and explanation, telling them that the reason he wrote was to assure them that this gospel, and this life it brings with it as we follow Jesus in his words and his deeds, as we sometimes find that doing so means that we follow him into human opposition, this is the true grace of God. This is God giving us out of his love. In Jesus God has given us forgiveness, we saw that earlier in the letter; he has made us to be real people with a mission and a purpose in life; he has promised us his presence and his eternal glory and he constantly gives us his care, so that we can cast our cares on him, and know that he will carry them and us.

So this week, when you are tempted to worry, about family, health, the future, events in the world, remember to cast your burden of care on God. Take it to him in prayer. Tell him about it, and then leave it with him. He can't carry it for you if you insist on taking it back again. Remember that the love of God is far greater than any power of evil. We worry about what – what to do, what will happen - and we worry about why – why has this happened, why do people act like this and what might that mean in my life - but we forget to think about who. Who is the Lord of all, who makes all things work together for good for those who love him, who is the one to whom our lives belong, who sent his Son for us, who cares for us? Who is all around us, always with us? Who was in the double rainbow over Newtonmore on Monday evening, in the rain itself that makes the earth flourish; who is in the pages of the Bible that you read each day, and in the eyes of the children of God gathered around you in worship?

You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord and besides me there is no saviour.

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.
Amen.