

**Laggan and Newtonmore
Parish Church of Scotland**

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Jesus the Challenger Part 2

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Isaiah 26:1-4

Luke 12:22-34

This piece of teaching for Jesus' disciples, this challenge that is set us, is prefaced by a parable told to the crowd. Remember that crowd, so great that they jostled and trampled each other, whom Jesus has been ignoring so that he could teach his disciples? They are still waiting and one of them has come with an agenda. He comes up to Jesus and demands, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Now, we are not told the ins and outs of that family situation, but ownership of a piece of the promised land was very important. Because of that, sometimes families did not want to follow the tradition of dividing up the property on the death of a father, as the pieces of land involved became impossibly small. Old Testament inheritance laws are complicated, but the man thinks he has a case or a right, and he certainly has a want. And Jesus tells a parable.

Once there was a rich man whose land produced an abundant harvest. It produced far more than he needed for one year. So he thought about what he would do with his surplus, and decided that the best thing would be to pull down his barns and build larger ones, to store his grain and his goods. "And then" he said, "I can take life easy. I have here enough for many years, so I can eat, drink and be merry and not have to do any back-breaking work." When he had made that decision, that very same night, before the barns were built, God said to him that his life-time was over. And God asked him who all his riches would benefit then. And Jesus said, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God."

The parable was for the crowd, a simple morality tale. The rich man took no thought to how his good fortune could benefit others, or to the damage he would do his land by not working it, or to himself by having no purpose in life but self-

indulgence: he thought only of himself and his comfort and in the end that was never going to save him. Greed is not good.

But then Jesus turns to his disciples and makes a link between greed and anxiety. It is in the light of this parable that he says “Therefore, I tell you do not worry about your life...” He seems to be saying that it is those who have and who want to have more who find it hardest to live at peace. Once you have a taste of having, you tend to think that your security is rooted in the things that you have, and that you need to have them and to have more of them so that you can be secure.

Jesus is in the phase of challenging his disciples to live in his way, to let what they hear him say affect their lives so that they will be consistent. What he is saying here, is that faith and anxiety do not go together. And faith and self-centeredness, or greed, also do not go together.

We all know that worry does not change anything. As Jesus says, “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” And we all know the answer. And yet, we do worry. We worry about our health and about our families, we worry about our nation and the state of the world, we worry about the future, mainly, because we cannot see it in any detail, and we don’t know what it will hold. And yet our worry does not change anything, except to take away our peace. And if we are following Jesus, we should be trusting God, who does know the future and who does know what will happen and who has promised never to leave nor forsake us.

Last week we saw Jesus issue the challenge to live with consistency and transparency. This week he is showing one aspect of this. Lack of anxiety is a consequence of living the life of faith. It means that we listen to God and trust God.

We live in an anxious age and it is made more anxious by our easy access to media – news media and social media. The news never seems to be far away, and most of what is reported is bad news, news of disaster and, especially in these days in this country, news of uncertainty, and of what might happen. I often think of an old woman I knew when I was minister in the Borders. Bertha was housebound in the village of Heriot. She didn’t see too well, and she didn’t walk too well, so she couldn’t go out alone. Her constant companion was her television and so she heard every news bulletin, which meant that she heard the same stories and speculation over and over. Heriot is a very safe little village with a crime rate of 0 per cent. But over time, as well as being unable to go out alone, Bertha became too frightened to leave her home. She wasn’t frightened of falling, not if someone was with her, but she was frightened of all the bad things that would happen to her because the world was so full of wickedness. She saw herself mugged and stabbed and run over – probably all at once. More than once I tried to tell her that the things on the news

were news because they were unusual, not because they were everyday and happening everywhere.

These days there is a media frenzy over Brexit: what, how when, if. Every week there is a new angle, and a new important day. While we should know what is happening in our country, following the press pack's every breathless utterance is to allow the anxiety of the times to feed into your soul. This tangle is not given to you to unravel; this problem is not yours to solve, so the best thing we can do is to bring it to God who knows all ends and sees beyond our vision.

If it isn't the news media attacking our peace of mind, it is social media. Most of us here are of a certain age, and so we probably don't follow social media the way that our children and grandchildren do. It is a real tool for keeping people in touch with each other, whether it is with Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram or Snapchat. But it is also a way in which people, young people especially, can be put under enormous pressure to measure up to some artificial standard, of looks or of life – of being successful. We saw just recently the sad story of the young girl who killed herself and then it was found that her social media feeds were full of images and thoughts about death. Now, I doubt that any of you are under that social media pressure – I certainly hope not – but it can be more subtle. I recently took myself off a Church of Scotland ministers' newsfeed, as I found that what other ministers posted could make me think that I was not doing it “right”, and not a good minister, which I have enough common sense to know is not true! No one was trying to make me feel that way – they would have been horrified - but the cumulative effect of social media can be alarming. If you have children and grandchildren, they may well feel it. Taking their phones off them or remonstrating doesn't really work: but modelling the peace that faith in God gives you is powerful.

Social media too often says that you are not good enough. Jesus says don't strive after the ephemeral things of life, or even after the things that we need for everyday life, because God loves you and will give them to you. God loves you – people need to hear that. God loves you and it is his pleasure to give you the kingdom – give you all that it means to be his: all his love and reassurance, all the purpose of being part of his world-changing family.

Not worrying does not mean not acting of course. If instead of worrying about our health we did what we could to keep as healthy as possible; if instead of worrying about our families we did all we could to love them and show it; if instead of worrying about our nation or the state of the world we sought to live in ways helpful to our neighbours, near and far; and if instead of worrying we prayed we might actually change things.

Anxiety tends to turn us inward. We worry about things that matter to us. It can make us self-centred, like the rich man in the parable. It can make us greedy,

wanting everything only for ourselves and those we know and care about. Jesus says that the antidote, the road to faith-filled peace is not to seek after the things of life, which God knows we need, (and that includes love and acceptance as well as food drink and clothing) but instead to focus our striving in life on God's kingdom.

And so we are back to that consistent life. If we are followers of Jesus, then all our life, and all our efforts will be spent in seeking to bring his kingdom into every situation where we find ourselves, or where we have any influence. If we are followers of Jesus, who trusted his Father in everything, we will be those who are known not for anxiety but for the peace which shines from us. Life is uncertain, but when we are blessed with a good harvest – with plenty in any way – we will remember that the way of God's kingdom is not to build bigger barns and keep it to ourselves, but to share and share and share again, because what God gives he gives not just for one, but for furthering his kingdom through his children on the earth.

Of course this peace-filled life is easier to talk about than to know, sometimes. We all have seasons of worry. But when they come, surely the thing to do is to take it to God. The prophet promises that God will keep us in perfect peace if our minds are stayed on him. When I think of the most peaceful people I know or have known, without exception they are those who have developed a life-long habit of taking everything to God in trust that he will work things out. I don't want to give you a living example, for fear of embarrassing anyone, but to give one example, whom many of you knew, think of Netta Macintyre. A lady of perfect peace and shining love, whose mind was stayed on her God.

If you have never developed a habit of prayer, of bringing things to God not once but throughout your day, it is never too late! It is never too late to begin to trust and to seek first the kingdom of God, and in doing this and developing this habit, you will find that any habit of anxiety and worry will gradually fade away as you learn to trust the one whose good pleasure it is to give us the kingdom. As St. Paul later said "The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7)