

Therefore I tell you, do not worry.

I think I'm the kind of person who would actually have to have Jesus standing in front of me for me to be able to do that or be like that, and maybe not even then. I'm a professional worrier and I don't seem to be able to do much about it. Even my grown up children telling me to "chill out, Dad," doesn't help, in fact it probably makes it worse.

But I suspect I'm not alone in being the way I am. The writer Henry David Thoreau said that "most people live lives of quiet desperation". In other words we're constantly working out "what ifs" we might never need, spoiling today – this day – with either burdens from the past (guilt, regret, sadness, anger) or fears about the future, what might happen tomorrow or the next day or a year from now.

This is what Paul means when he talks about creation groaning in labour pains, waiting and longing to be set free – set free from what? Well I would say, mostly set free from ourselves. Set free from me. In ancient Greek plays there was a chorus of actors who would take to the stage at regular intervals to comment on what had happened or what was about to happen to the main characters, commenting on their folly and how this tragedy is going to unfold. Well, many of us, maybe most, have this Greek chorus in our heads, an endless commentary on what I've done or not done, what I've done to others, what's been done to me, where I've gone wrong, what I could have done/should have done better or differently. It seems to have only one script to read and it's mostly bad.

In my one to one work of being alongside other people, I find it's a rare person who has managed to give that Greek chorus the sack, shown them the door and told them not to come back – which is what Jesus would want us to do. He says: I did not come into the world to condemn. Paul, in a lovely phrase to the Colossians, "When our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts." And to the Romans: "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect. It is God who justifies – who is to condemn...?" So we're to show that chorus of miserable voices the door and listen to the only voice that matters.

What enables Paul to keep going and to be like this – and heaven knows Paul had plenty to worry about – is this incredible living hope that almost lifts him off his feet. He hopes, he believes, that every last atom of himself, body, mind and spirit, is going to be redeemed. So he waits for this total setting free with on the one hand eager longing, like he's standing on his tiptoes straining to see it, and with patience – because this is a hope, not a fact as yet, but a hope so powerful that it can sustain him and us through this deeply worrying, genuinely difficult thing we call life.

And here Jesus meets us as we are. Remember his words to Martha: Martha, Martha, you are anxious about so many things – one only is needful. And the one thing only is to live in moment by moment dependence on God, like the birds and the lilies. He knows we're made the way we are. Your heavenly Father knows you need these things, but seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be yours as well.

A French priest of the seventeenth century, Jean-Pierre de Caussade used to speak about the Sacrament of the Present Moment. In other words this very moment, if I'm

alive to it with full awareness, has the potential to reveal God to me, like a sacrament, as if this were the only moment that there will ever be. Other writers today speak about the “power of now”, in other words not dissipating all our best energies with either regrets for the past or fears and worries for the future – possibly the devil’s best and most effective trick because all this worrying renders us paralysed. It stops us from hearing birdsong, smelling roses (or lilies) and being awake to a goodness in the world and awake to God’s goodness in a way that makes us thankful.

Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, gives us a practice which can help here and it’s called The Examen. A Roman Catholic sister taught me this many years ago and she describes this prayer practice in three words: Thank you; Sorry; Please. The first part is a bringing to mind of absolutely anything you can think of that’s been good in the day (a phone call from a friend, a beautiful sunset, a nice meal, someone smiling at you – anything) – anything that’s brought light into your day, where the good energy has been. I started doing this at a time in my life when I didn’t feel I had much to be thankful for and it surprised me how even in the worst days there was always something.

The second part – Sorry – isn’t about beating yourself up. It’s about bringing to God anything you regret, a word you wish you hadn’t spoken, something you could have done better and just bringing all of it under this immense tenderness of God to let him heal and forgive you and allow you to go into the night in peace. It is not the Greek chorus – quite the opposite.

And the third part – Please – is where you turn your prayer outward from yourself and pray for others, for anybody you’re carrying in your heart, someone you want God to bless. And if you fall asleep during this last part, that’s just fine. That’s ok for a child of God, which is what we all are.

So maybe there’s hope for all us worriers. There is one who loves us and who would and will bear our burdens with us, if only we let him. Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Therefore I tell you, do not worry. Amen.