

Trinity Baptist Church - Sunday 25th April 2021
Janet and Peter Dallman – ‘Comfort or Kingdom?’

Matthew 6:25-34

1) A different kind of comfort

When I say the word ‘comfort’, what do you think of? Perhaps a certain brand of fabric softener? Or your favourite pillow? We talk about ‘comfort eating’, or the comfort of a hot bath. Your perhaps your pet? What gives you comfort?

The passage that we read tackles the issue of human comfort and security, telling us not to worry. Another way of thinking about our ‘worries’ is to think about where our focus is. All of us can get our priorities mixed up. In verse 25, Jesus tells us what *not* to worry about, or to put it another way, what *not* to focus on!

Jesus tells us not to worry about what we’re going to eat or drink, or about what we’re going to wear.

I’m know that for some of us, money might be very tight at the moment. That’s a really tough place to be. But this bit of the Bible has hope for you, so keep listening.

But, Jesus isn’t talking here about those who are struggling with the practicalities of life. The point he’s making is that these things are not to be *all-important*. Jesus is speaking to people whose focus is in the wrong place.

However, Jesus doesn’t just say, ‘Don’t worry. It’ll be alright.’ He helps us understand why our focus doesn’t need to be on food, drink and clothes using two examples.

Picture the sparrows in your garden, or the ducks on Danson lake. What does Jesus say about them? Verse 26 says, ‘Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.’ Can you imagine sparrows and ducks planting wheat and storing it away? Of course not! But, says Jesus, ‘Your heavenly Father feeds them’. God cares about birds so much that he provides food for them. And he goes on to say at the end of verse 26, ‘Are you [that is the people he’s talking to] not much more valuable than they [that is the birds]?’ Jesus isn’t devaluing birds, he’s explaining that if God our Heavenly Father cares enough about birds to provide food for them, then how much more he will provide food for human beings? That means we don’t need to make food and drink the focus of our attention.

Then Jesus paints another picture about flowers. In verses 28 and 29 he says, ‘See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon [an Old Testament king] in all his splendour was dressed like one of these.’ Whether you like lilies, pansies, tulips or roses, just think about how beautiful they are. Jesus goes on to say, ‘If that is how God clothes the grass of the field which is here today and tomorrow is thrown in to the fire, will he not much more clothe you...? Again, Jesus isn’t doing flowers down, he’s saying, ‘Look, if God cares that much for flowers which don’t last five minutes, surely you can see how much more he’ll provide clothes for you?!’

The Message version of the Bible puts these verses like this:

“If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don’t fuss about what’s on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body.”

If you are struggling to make ends meet at the moment, these verses provide wonderful reassurance for you. God, your heavenly Father, knows what you need, he cares for you and your family way more than the flowers and birds which he provides for, and he will provide for you. And, on a practical note, if you are struggling, please don’t struggle alone, get in touch with Andy, Janet or the church.

And if you are well-off – and I suspect that many if not most of us fall in this category - let me challenge you and myself too, where is our focus? Even though we have more than enough, are we still obsessing, focusing and worrying about purely physical things?

However, there is a condition attached to God's provision...

Look at verse 33. It says, 'But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.'

Instead of focusing on comfort, we need to focus on God's kingdom and his righteousness. We're going to take a look at what that means in greater detail a little bit later, but before we do that, I want to consider what it looks like to live a comfort-focused life. And I want to begin by sharing from my own experience during the most recent lockdown.

2) Comfort focus?

One of the things we usually do on home assignment is to visit each of the five churches which support us. This time, we've been able to attend the online house group of one of our churches, and we were challenged to think about our answers to several questions, which were:

- What do you love?
- What do you hate?
- What do you fear?
- What do you see as your rights?
- What do you pray for?
- What do you think or daydream about?

I wonder how you would answer these questions? As I thought about them, I gave answers like;

'I love Pete and mum', 'I love nice food and meeting people', I love exploring new places.'

'I hate being cooped up, being bored, not meeting friends.'

'I'm afraid of getting Covid or being ill.'

'I feel I have a right to enjoy this short time in the UK. I have a right to go to church and to have a holiday.' 'I pray for personal healing and for an end to the pandemic and for personal direction.'

'I dream about holidays and visiting people, and a home of our own.'

As I looked at my answers, I realised that I was totally focused on *my* comfort, *my* enjoyment, *my* freedom, *my* health! I was shocked, to be honest, at how self-centred, self-focused I was. In some ways, my answers were understandable, even reasonable. But I was doing exactly what Jesus said I shouldn't be doing! I was *focusing* on the wrong things, and I wasn't focusing on God's kingdom and his righteousness. I asked God to forgive me and to help me focus instead on him and on his kingdom coming in to the world.

Personal Comfort

So on a personal level, let me challenge you, and myself again, this morning. What are we focusing on? Our comfort or God's kingdom? Maybe you could think about these questions during a time of prayer sometime this week.

Trinity's Comfort

And what about Trinity as a church, where is our focus? Are we comfort-focused or kingdom-focused?

What do Trinity members love?

What do Trinity members hate?

What do Trinity members fear?

What do Trinity members see as their rights?

What do Trinity members pray for?

What do Trinity members think or daydream about?

Challenging questions... Are we focused on what we love or hate about church services, particularly in regard to the restrictions we are currently under? Are we focused on ourselves and our families, rather than reaching out to one another as a church body? Are we reaching out to our community, or have we quietly forgotten them while we're distracted by the pandemic? Are we living in fear of catching Covid if we come to church in person? What are we praying for – is it comfort-focused or kingdom-focused? What are we dreaming about as a church?

UK Comfort

We thought it might also be helpful to think about our culture and how British people in general slip into self-focus or comfort-focus. I found this difficult to think about but here are my ideas. What do you think?

I think we often focus on our families. Family meals, get-togethers and holidays are wonderful and we have all missed them greatly, but they can become our reason for living or our main way of finding comfort.

We can also put all our effort into making sure the children are doing well in school. A minister told me that education is an idol for many in his area of south England.

We Brits also like claim our rights, don't we? We want to decide what we do and when we do it. We don't want our rights to be restricted or limited. This can also become just simple self-centeredness.

Then it's been said that 'If there's such a thing as a British dream, it's to own the roof over your head. Maybe that's because owning a home gives us stability and independence, but the danger is that it becomes our dominant priority.

Japan's Comfort

What about Japan? Where do Japanese people find comfort or place their focus?

Conformity – You can see all the matching shoes in the photo! The vast majority of Japanese people don't want to be special, they just want to be normal. Their focus is making sure they don't stand out.

Health – Health is an overwhelming focus for Japanese people, with multiple health checks and a huge food supplements industry.

Safety first – in a country that has so many natural disasters, it is not surprising that safety is a big concern. But this 'safety first' idea can flip over into a 'We will never do anything risky' attitude, let's stay comfortable.

Finally, Japan has a 'we can do it ourselves' attitude. That's what these words mean. The response of the people of Japan to the great earthquake in 2011 was one of great resilience and self-sufficiency. They find comfort in themselves and their ability.

3) Kingdom focus?

Finally, let's look at what it means to live a kingdom-focused life? Let's return to verse 33 which says, 'But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.' What is God's kingdom?

During his earthly ministry Jesus' role was to tell people about the kingdom of God. He explained how people can enter God's kingdom, which is for everyone all over the world. He showed what the kingdom of God looks like through his power over demons, healing the sick and raising the dead. Basically, the 'kingdom of God' means everything to do with God's saving and transforming reign, perfectly demonstrated in Jesus. I like this quote, "As he proclaimed the kingdom...Jesus became positively involved in every area of human life – spiritual, social, economic and ecological." (Gnanakan, 1989, p.114)

But God's kingdom didn't end with Jesus' work on earth. In Matthew 28:19 Jesus tells his disciples, 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.' We are called to focus on sharing and showing God's kingdom in every way we can with our family, friends, neighbours and strangers.

So, what do kingdom-focused lives look like? Although we don't in any way live perfectly kingdom-focused lives – as we've already told you – we thought we could illustrate what it means for us personally to live kingdom-focused lives as missionaries in Japan. Then we'll think about how Trinity as a church and each of us can become more kingdom-focused.

Dallman's kingdom focus

Missionary Training –

Over the past three and a half years my role in OMF Japan, our missionary organisation, has been to help train and equip missionaries.

Missionaries don't arrive in Japan completely Christ-like. They don't have all the skills needed to start churches and reach Japanese people for Jesus.

So my role is to help them grow in Christ-likeness and have roots in Japan for a life of long-term kingdom fruitfulness and service. I help them think about Japanese culture, about strategy and vision. I run team building sessions so that missionaries can work well together.

In this role I'm greatly encouraged by the fact that the Lord Jesus, in His Kingdom-focused-life, also spent much time training his disciples.

Missionary Care –

My main kingdom-focus in Japan has been missionary care. Sharing God's kingdom with Japanese people isn't easy, which means missionaries care.

Firstly, Japanese is a tough language. Secondly, Japanese culture is complex and it takes a very long time to understand Japanese people's ways of thinking and behaving. Thirdly, less than 1% of Japanese people are Christians and the church is small; in fact, it is shrinking. Fourthly, missionaries in Japan are far from family and friends at home.

These things, combined with all the usual experiences of life and death, not to mention the pandemic mean that missionaries to Japan need a lot of care. They need practical care, they need counselling, someone to

listen and pray with. They need encouragement when learning, understanding and sharing about Jesus in Japanese! They need spiritual encouragement. They need friends and God's family. My main role in Japan has been to try to make sure that no missionary in OMF Japan is lacking in care, although of course I haven't provided all that care myself!

The Lady in the Laundrette –

We also wanted to share just two examples of how we have been able to share God's kingdom with Japanese people.

Last year, in the launderette opposite our flat, I had three conversations with a Japanese lady in her mid-80's. The Lady in the Laundrette wore a white hat and a mask, a blue shiny coat and had smiley eyes.

The first conversation concentrated on how to use the machine, my Japanese ability and what we do when we return to the UK. I said, 'We see our families and say 'thank you' to the churches that support us. And everywhere we tell of Jesus and His love.'

40 minutes later, I went back for the 'washer to dryer' manoeuvre.

Conversation two began with the lady asking, 'Isn't it hard (to speak of Jesus) in Japan, with so many gods here?' 'Yes', I replied, 'but there is just one true and living God.' It ended with me giving her a tract containing a simple description of the Bible's message.

The last conversation was 20 minutes later at the 'Is it dry yet?' stage.

The Lady in the Laundrette was still there and was actually reading the tract! 'I have an interest so I'm reading.' she explained. Then she asked, 'What about now in this pandemic? We need peace and hope.' 'Yes we do.' I said, 'I know that someone is holding the steering wheel of this world. It is the God who loves us who's in charge. That means that I'm safe and it's OK.'

By now, my blanket was dry and I committed the Lady in the Laundrette to the Lord of the Harvest who could make the seed grow.

Mrs Nakazawa –

In July 2020, I took myself to a local park for a day of retreat. I sat on a bench under the trees on the 30C day and enjoyed a quiet hour or so thinking and praying. Then an elegant, well-dressed Japanese lady approached and asked if she could sit down.

I wasn't prepared for this. I wasn't prepared to be conversational, I was supposed to be retreating! Also, Japanese people are highly unlikely to join a foreigner on a bench. More usually, they would shy away!

Mrs Nakazawa sat down and I made polite comments about the heat of the day and the beauty of the park. She began to chat, asking me where I was from, how long I'd been in Japan, telling me about her life overseas, she told me about her deceased husband, her daughters. More surprises; Japanese people don't open up like this normally! I discovered a lonely lady, wanting friends, ready to talk and ready to listen to what it meant for me to be a Christian missionary in Japan. I dug out an old Christmas tract, wrote the name of a local church on it and encouraged her to go.

I visited the church two weeks later and there she was, and she has since joined the church's gospel choir. She isn't yet a Christian, but God is watering the seed.

I should add, by the way, that things like this don't happen to us every day! We could share other stories where nothing happened and the person wasn't remotely interested! The point we want to make is that we all need to be ready to share God's kingdom with those we meet, even when we least expect it.

Trinity's kingdom focus

These are just a few examples of what being kingdom-focused has looked like for us as missionaries to Japan. But what about here at Trinity? How is Trinity Baptist Church kingdom-focused?

Within Trinity, the buddy system to support those who need a bit of extra help during lockdown shows God's kingdom-care. The people who steward, preach, lead our singing or play instruments, who teach the children or YP all show that Trinity is kingdom-focused. Outside the church, Trinity's involved in Foodbank, with Cribs, with Baby & Co when it can run, and Alpha is starting tonight. I know in the past some have been involved with Street Pastors or evangelism in the Broadway. All these are examples of a kingdom focus.

But how is God calling Trinity Baptist Church to continue to be kingdom-focused, as we emerge from lockdown? It's so easy for our focus to drift back to a comfort-agenda instead of a kingdom-agenda isn't it?

Your kingdom focus

Finally, there are at least five ways we can contribute to God's kingdom work in the world.

Learning for the Kingdom -

Could we learn about our neighbours? How have they coped over the last year? Or thinking more widely, what about learning about the different ethnic communities in Bexley? Or thinking worldwide, is there a country that interests you? Learn more about how God is bringing in his Kingdom there.

Praying for the Kingdom -

In the work of the Kingdom of God, nothing is more important than prayer. The Lord's Prayer itself says, 'Your kingdom come!' Could you commit to praying for Trinity's Alpha course? If you want to pray for the needs of Japan, then come to the prayer meeting this coming week. Let's pray for the Kingdom to come!

Welcoming for the Kingdom -

Because of all the changes affecting Hong Kong at least 130,000 people are expected to migrate to the UK this year. Will we welcome Christians from Hong Kong to Trinity if they come? Will we be hospitable to others in our community? And when we are allowed to have people into our homes, who will we welcome for the sake of the Kingdom of God?

Send for the Kingdom -

The idea of sending is often linked with missionaries going overseas, like Trinity sends Janet and me to Japan – thank you so much for doing that. But there's a list of others that Trinity also sends out and supports on the news sheet. What about being in contact with one of those people and offer a word of encouragement or a Bible verse that has helped you.

Going for the Kingdom-

Fortunately, God doesn't call super-Christians to be missionaries. What God does, is call people to live with him and for him in another place. So you and I can 'Go for the Kingdom' in our workplaces, or we can 'Go for the Kingdom' at college, or we can 'Go for the Kingdom' to another country.

Let's be kingdom-focused people! Let's pray.

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, thank you that you know our needs and are concerned for us. Please meet our needs according to your riches in glory, especially those who are struggling at the moment. Lord we confess that we easily become focused only on our own comfort and concerns. Please forgive us. Help us to find practical ways to be more kingdom-minded and kingdom-focused in the coming days. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.