

Finding peace in the midst of anxiety

During this pandemic I have been having to ask myself some serious questions about my faith. As a Christian I affirm my faith in a God who in Jesus offers a peace 'beyond all understanding' at times of worry and anxiety; so now that I am faced with the global and local crisis presented by corona virus, how do I understand that offer of peace to work in practice?

So many people we speak with are having to face up to uncertainties about their future health (and that of their loved ones), about their job security and how they will be able to make ends meet, about how they will cope with physical isolation, to name but a few of the uncertainties. The scale of these challenges and the anxiety they often induce, can make the 'peace of God that passes all understanding' difficult to articulate or hold on to.

I've struggled to know quite what to say during some of these conversations and, if I'm honest, in some of the ways in which I have been experiencing uncertainty and anxiety I have also struggled myself.

Recently, however, I did find some fresh insights into experiencing God's gift of peace in the midst of anxiety, which came from what was (for me at least) a most unlikely source – that of jogging!

Jogging has for the last 40 years been a form of exercise that I have always avoided. Mainly due to my school experience of cross-country running when it was everyone for themselves and for me quite a lonely experience – often stuck near the back, worried if I would manage the course before the next lesson started.

But what I discovered, once I had given into those who encouraged me to try it out, was that jogging doesn't need to be such an anxious lonely experience.

First, because the various jogging programmes that are now available with their mobile phone apps offer a reassuring voice and guide in your ear whilst you are jogging. I chose the voice of 200 metre Olympic champion Michael Johnson, whose gentle tones gave reassurance that the daunting 5 kilometre target was manageable if I stuck to the programme and whose direction helped me to be solely focussed on the next 3 or 5 minute section.

Secondly I discovered jogging doesn't have to be a lonely experience given that you can now follow a programme with others, literally accompanied by those jogging at your side, those who are aiming for the same target but not in a race with you to get there first.

Of course being anxious about whether one manages to complete a 5 kilometre run, is nothing compared to the other challenges we and others may be facing about health and financial security. But there is here perhaps a helpful image of how we might experience the peace of God in the midst of major anxiety.

First there is the way in which the jogging programme provides a framework of hope to trust in that is tried and tested, releasing the runner simply to focus on the next section ahead without worrying about the seemingly impossible end target. Similarly in the world of faith, the Christian framework of hope is rooted, tried and tested in Jesus who, as the pioneer (Hebrews 12), has already run the programme from death into life, making possible what is humanly impossible by means of his death and resurrection. Those come after need only follow in the way of Christ trusting in the programme of life through his gift of grace.

Secondly, in the image of the accompanying jogger there is a reminder of the crucial role that fellow believers play in supporting each other through whatever anxieties they each face. This role is one of accompanying, not merely watching like a spectator.

All of this leads to the following three questions for suggested further reflection and perhaps sharing with others in conversation:

- Where in scripture or the Christian tradition and experience do we find helpful reassurance of God's wider purposes and plans for us? And how can we draw upon such reassurance when 'making our requests to God'(Phil 4:6) so as not be overwhelmed by anxiety?
- Where we face seemingly impossible challenges that might intimidate us, what instead might be the manageable 'next steps' that we could focus on, whether in our walk with God or in our other daily routines and habits?
- How much of this would we be willing to share with colleagues and friends to enable their accompanying of us in prayer and conversation?

Richard Worsfold