

PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9 HIGH ANXIETY?

I confess I have bought a soup maker! Why? Well over the past year I have lost a pound or two. Weight loss is easy. Keeping it off is more difficult. I am anxious about regaining 35 kilos, so have done something to ease that anxiety. I reckon that making yummy very low-calorie soup one meal a day at least won't add to my waistline. I suppose this means that I am using soup making as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, training my mind so that it deals with the problems of life differently.

VS 6: St Paul says, *'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made know to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.'*

Nice. But easier said than done! Life is full of trials and difficulties. Some of these of course are real: hurricanes, job loss, relationships going down the pan, money, ageing, an endless list. Others are imaginary, but in a sense no less real. A charming young actress with whom I was shooting a scene last month suddenly went pale and pointed at my head. I reached up and found a tiny spider dangling from a thread. To me it was nothing. To her it was clearly about to leap for my jugular.

The point is of course that high stress levels can lead to General Anxiety Disorder in its various forms. And it is highly debilitating. One of my closest friends and long-term supporters is currently completely out of action. In the press this week an article reported that one in four adults in our society is affected. Anxiety is a curse of our age.

Can we do anything about it?

Vs 8 of our reading is in a sense, St Paul's version of CBT; training our mind to react differently to stress. He writes, *'Finally beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is anything of excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing these things that you have learned and received and heard from me, and the God of peace will be with you.'*

What might that mean for today?

Part of my training as a curate, (OK many years ago) was to take the then industry standard NHS postgrad diploma in psychological counselling. It has been enormously helpful over the years. Here are some points that might be helpful in beating Anxiety. You may find one or two useful, all of them, or none at all.

'I am willing to change.' Really? Yes. Nothing can help us unless we are prepared to move on. One client has often asked me, 'Will God change things?' My answer is fairly blunt, 'Not until you are prepared to shift.' She is still stuck. And very sorry for herself. Are we willing to change?

'Embrace the uncertainty.' We are in the process of appointing a new head at one of our schools. Getting Heads at all is very difficult at all these days, let alone in small Bucks infants schools where they have to do most of the teaching too. I have no idea what will happen, it is very stressful. But all I can do is learn to embrace and live with the uncertainty or it will push me under.

'I got this' In our deanery a highly talented young vicar in a new parish is having a tricky time as all the problems pop

up at once. It can be the same in any job. The start of a Formula 1 Grand Prix race is just like that. In a moment at increasing speed cars are jockeying for position and are all over the place. Give it a couple of laps and the field will stretch out. Meanwhile, drivers just keep their wits about them, eyes open, and steer through as best they can till the chaos eases. 'I got this.' In life, sometimes that is will can do. 'I got this.'

'In Christ, I am fabulous.' I am particularly unworthy of my office. My life is full of moral grot. It all gets me down. And yet, just as those of us who have children can be really fed up with their behaviour, as we see them off to school scrubbed up each new morning our hearts burst with pride. This is the way God thinks of us each morning too. 'In Christ, I am fabulous.' Sometimes it is enormously helpful to remember this.

'Celebrate the past.' Life is not just the now. Today may be bad, but the wider picture is more important. Constantly recall the good things and times. Today will pass. My whole life is what counts.

'I am what I do, not what I think and feel.' Towards the end of his life an old chap wanted to confess various sins formally. I duly administered absolution. A week later he called me and said, 'I don't feel forgiven.' My reply was, 'Bad luck mate, you are. Tough!' What he had done in confessing, not how he felt, is what counted.

'I am relentless' My generation was told the moral tale of Robert the Bruce; the famous Scottish would-be king who led the struggle against the English. Holed up in a cave he watched a little spider try time and time again to weave its web until it succeeded. It inspired him to keep up the fight. Sometimes we too need to be relentless.

‘Expecting nothing, accepting everything.’ Everyone in his parish knew that Rev Richard Coles was in the frame for Strictly. He went into training last Easter making the excuse that he might enter the London marathon next year. Hah! OK, expectations of his longevity were low, but who knows. Russell Grant did well despite the odds. Maybe our own hopes will be dashed as his were. That’s the way it is. If so it helps to expect nothing and to accept what comes. But who knows next time?

All these things can help us deal with and even beat Anxiety.

St Paul is right. *‘Finally beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is anything of excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing these things that you have learned and received and heard from me, and the God of peace will be with you.’*

V 9, ‘Keep on doing these things.....’ and the God of peace will be with you.’

I don’t know if any of this helps, but in your life may you find it so.