



How ambitious should we be?

Matthew 6:19-34

Just over ten years ago, the British psychologist, author and broadcaster Oliver James published his book *Affluenza*, an exploration of the way in which so many people are now richer than before but less happy, in possession of home comforts and clever technology far in excess of that enjoyed by previous generations but also under greater pressure.

One reviewer of the book provides a helpful summary of the argument made by James, his critique of "Affluenza", a virus-like condition that spreads through affluent countries. In these countries, notably English-speaking ones, people define themselves by how much money they make. They are also ruled by superficial values - how attractive they look, how famous they are, how much they are able to show off. As the sociologist Erich Fromm would have put it, we have moved from a state of "being" to a state of "having". Now we are obsessed with what other people think of us, and we've lost touch with our own feelings.¹

The first disciples who listened to the Sermon on the Mount inhabited a world which was very different to ours. Prayers for 'daily bread' had an added urgency for many people who lived from one day to the next. In 2019, there are still some of us who find it hard to trust God because of severe financial pressures that we face, but others who find it hard to rely on God because of their own wealth and their inability to see past an economic structure based on a belief in scarcity and competition for resources rather than the abundant provision of God.

This week's reading is divided into two sections in most of the translations we use. In verses 19-24, Jesus speaks of the stark choice which faces his disciples with regard to 'treasures.' We can either accumulate resources and wealth here on earth, or we can have a heavenly focus. But we cannot have it both ways (v24), and the manner in which we choose will be a reflection of our ultimate priorities. 'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (v21).

In verses 25-34, Jesus addresses the issue of anxiety. When teaching his disciples on prayer, he has just encouraged them to remember the character of the Father to whom they bring their needs, the one who sees what is done in secret and who will reward them (Matt 6:4,6,18). When talking about the issue of anxiety, he speaks again of the Father who attentively cares for the whole of creation (v26) and who knows the needs of his children (v32). A trust in the love and faithfulness of the Father is one element of Jesus' 'cure for anxiety'. He also speaks again of priorities, urging his followers to 'seek first his kingdom and his righteousness' while trusting God to give what is needed accordingly. Finally, he tells us to 'Discipline your

¹ For the full review see: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jan/27/booksonhealth.society>

thoughts. The plan is simple: don't waste thoughts on regretting yesterday nor on second-guessing tomorrow... Such obsessions account for a remarkable proportion of the time we invest in worrying, and the only way to deal with them is to kill them dead. Jesus pinpoints the real irony of so much of our worrying, that it is so rooted in speculation, fantasy and wild imagining that it can have no positive benefit in the real world.²

For discussion

1. Pensions, insurance, financial planning, cooking... What's the line between our own responsibility in these kinds of matters – and God's?³
2. What are the things which you find yourself worrying about most? In what ways does such anxiety rob you of your sense of contentment and trust in God?
3. Take time to look back over the references we find to God as Father, in the Lord's Prayer and throughout Matthew 6 – what picture is building of God and how does this help your understanding of this theme of anxiety?
4. As we read Jesus' description of how God feeds the birds of the air and clothes the flowers of the field, many of us will experience an unease. We know of people who are going hungry or homeless, struggling to get by from day-to-day. How can we reconcile Jesus' teaching here with these situations?
5. During Sunday's sermon Trevor suggested that Jesus' teaching on hoarding possessions and being anxious can apply to churches just as much to individuals. Do you agree?
6. In this passage Jesus doesn't just offer practical advice about how counterproductive it is to worry. He also challenges our priorities, encouraging us in v33 to, 'seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.' Can you think of practical examples of what it looks like to 'seek first his kingdom' in your daily life? Can you think of times when you've done this and how you've then found God to provide for your other needs accordingly?

² Gerard Kelly, *Humanifesto: A Rough Guide to the Sermon on the Mount*, 2001, 73

³ Question taken from Chris Leonard, *Cover to Cover: The Sermon on the Mount*, 2005, 42