

## **Taking Thought For Tomorrow**

Though by some people it has been misunderstood and taken wrongly, clearly one of the most needed teachings of the Lord concerns worry and anxiety. His well-known words on the subject, found in Matthew Gospel, Chapter 6, part of The Sermon on the Mount, come at the end of a section in which He had, by example, pointed to the Divine care and concern over things - over the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow " He urged " for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day." (Matthew 6:34).

I spoke of this as one of the most needed teachings of the Lord. And it is not difficult to see why. In many quarters today worry has come to be looked upon as the most subtle and destructive of all human diseases. We worry about the future. (Many, in fact, worry whether there can be a long-term future for the world what with the threat of a nuclear holocaust, pollution, population pressures and so on). We worry about problems and future responsibilities. Parents worry about their children. The middle-aged start to worry about retirement and old age. The old worry about how long they can hope to care for themselves and whether they will be a burden on others. And so it goes on. And if this is true of today, it has been true of people in the past reaching back into time immemorial. It seems, of course, that everything is up to us; that we have to cover every contingency, and provide against every eventuality. We worry because of the appearance - the appearance that it's all in our hands. But the appearance is not the reality.

As is said in the Gospels elsewhere - and we shall look at the words in a moment - the Lord's Providence is in and over the very least things connected with a person's life. It may be difficult for us to take this in, and yet it is so. The Lord has created everyone everywhere to live to eternity in a state of deep happiness and inmost contentment, and He is watching over us to bring this about, if it is at all possible to do so. And if, as Swedenborg says, we could see but a glimmer of what is involved in that care and watchfulness we would be amazed. "There are" he wrote, "thousands and again thousands of arcana scarcely a single one of which is known to man, according to which the Lord leads the man when from a life of hell he is to be introduced into the life of heaven". (*Arcana Caelestia* 9336). The Lord permits evil and unpleasant experiences when He has to do and yet works with us at the time they occur to bring some good out of them.

With regard to His care for us there need be no doubt whatever. "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore: you are of more value than many sparrows." (Luke 12: 6,7).

Certainly things happen which distress and bewilder us; things which, of necessity, the Lord permits but which, at the same time, and as we've noted, He seeks to use with us and for our benefit. None of us welcome pain, for example, and yet if we work with the Lord we can grow in patience and in our understanding of human distress generally, because of it. Our experience of set-backs and difficulties can bring us into greater understanding of the needs and concerns of others. Our instances of sin and foolishness, when reflected upon, can be used to lead us into humility. Whether in states of good or evil, whether in times of happiness or sadness, the Lord is present, ever concerned for our eternal welfare, ever caring for us.

It must not be thought, though, that we do absolutely nothing; that we abandon any effort we might otherwise make and hand it all over to the Lord. This, in fact, is where the misunderstanding enters in, as to what the Lord meant, which I spoke of at the beginning. The words "Take no thought" have been taken to mean 'Well, we don't have to do anything. The Lord will look after it all'. But they don't mean that at all.

What the Lord was referring to, as is now recognised and as the newer translations of the Bible has picked up, He was talking about anxiety and worry about the future. The New English Bible reads here, for instance, "So do not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after itself." And in the less familiar translation of J.B. Phillips we find the words, "Don't worry at all then about tomorrow. Tomorrow can take care of itself." We must give thought to the future and provide for it the best way we can. If we have responsibilities with regard to children, for example, we cannot but anticipate them and provide for them ahead of time as is reasonable and as we are able. If a person has retirement looming on the horizon he or she will begin preparation for it. Closely care for us, as He does, yet the Lord calls upon us to come to terms with life on the basis of individual initiative; to face up to its demands, obligations and responsibilities; to make decisions and use prudence. Let us be quite clear on this point: human foresight, anticipation of future needs, and provision for them, is not being condemned here. It's not even the point at issue.

What is being condemned is the unceasing fear for the future of which we are all too familiar and which is so rife in our society; our fear for ourselves in a given situation; our anxiety as to whether we shall be able to cope, whether we will have provided sufficiently and decided wisely; our worry as to whether we are going to successfully see through problems which are yet before us. What the Lord is urging is trust in His Providence; trust, that if we have done our best, provided as we have been able, decided as at the time we sincerely believed to be right, the matter can safely be left in His hands. Here is what is being got at - trust and confidence; trust and confidence that if we act to the best of our ability today, the Lord both can and will be with us in the problems and difficulties of the future.

"Those who trust in the Divine" wrote Swedenborg, "although they have care for the morrow, yet they have it not; for they do not think of the morrow with solicitude, still less with anxiety. They are equably minded whether they obtain their desires or not; they do not grieve over the loss of them, and are content with their lot. If they become wealthy, they do not set their hearts on wealth; if they are promoted to honours, they do not regard themselves as more worthy than others; if they become poor, they are not made sad; if they are in humble circumstances, they are not cast down. They know that for those who trust in the Divine all things make for a happy state to eternity, and that whatever befalls them in time is still conducive thereto." (*Arcana Caelestia* 8478).

To trust in the Lord is to have confidence in His care over our lives and to believe that He will order all the experiences that come our way in the interests of our eternal happiness and wellbeing. It is to know that if we strive to live according to His teaching and allow ourselves, or be determined, to be guided by it, we need have no fear of the future for by so doing we shall be equipped to face up to the future when it comes.

As we can know anxiety and despair with regard to the natural circumstances of our lives, so also it can come to us with regard to our spiritual life and the future so far as that is concerned. And it is clear that understood at a deeper level the Lord's words speak to us of this as well. We've been talking so far about anxiety and worry so far as the things of this world are concerned - how we would cope with an illness, should it befall us, handle unemployment, should we find ourselves unemployed, manage in our retirement, and those sorts of things. But that's not the only level at which we know worry and anxiety, is it?

As we look into ourselves at times of self-examination and repentance it's easy to become anxious and concerned, for the future, on the basis of what we see and detect there. We see a lot of self-love and self-centredness, as active and having as strong an influence as ever. And we can't help but worry about the future; worry if we will ever change.

"The tomorrow" for which the Lord said we are to take no thought is to be understood in this regard as meaning states of mind and different situations and circumstances, always changing as they are, which we are yet to enter upon. To take thought for tomorrow means, at this level, to start despairing that we can ever overcome the evils of which, from time to time, we become aware in ourselves. It is the kind of anxiety which, if we don't get on top of it, can lead to us giving up and giving in to a sense of hopelessness about ourselves. And what the Lord is saying to us here is this. It is enough that we come to terms with and resolve to overcome the evils in ourselves of which we are most conscious at the moment. It is sufficient for us to take one or at the most two things and work on these. Nothing more than that is asked of us. Regeneration, or spiritual re-birth, is a step by step process. As we reject certain evils from our lives others come to our consciousness and then others after those. And each step is a preparation for the one to follow. If we deal effectively with the job on hand; with the evils of which we are conscious now - at this moment - so we are strengthened to deal with the ones which will follow. And we need have no fear or anxiety about them.

As has so rightly been said, our job is to concentrate our sight and our efforts upon that which the Lord has declared to be sufficient for us to undertake - the removal of those patent disorders which are active in our present state. This is what He asks of us. And here is where our responsibility lies. As He said, "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day."

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