

Thought for the Day – Bishop Richard Harries

20th March 2020

Good morning. I had to be out one evening earlier in the week, and as I walked home, I noticed all the pubs and restaurants already closed - except for one. I peered through the glass and saw three couples, widely spaced, talking away excitedly, obviously exulting in being fully alive and well. At the same time, I know of one very fit young adult, who is at home totally crippled with anxiety. It bears out what I think we are all aware of, we vary hugely in our degree of anxiety. Some of us worry about the smallest things, others live life, even on the edge, with great insouciance. Of course, appearances can be deceptive. It's well known that some people who become comics do so because an inner despair has driven them to make others laugh, so the bravado of some in the face of danger may in fact cover quite a high level of anxiety.

Anxiety is worry about the future, its sheer uncertainty, what it might bring. In proper measure it is a good thing- it prompts us, very sensibly, to try to control things so far as we can. So, the evidence-based policies that the government are putting in place and the steps we are taking personally, are an entirely rational response at this worrying time. Yet in the end we have to face the fact that there is an inevitable element of uncertainty and unpredictability in life. The creative forces in nature which brought you and I into existence in the first place and to the beginning of another day also have an out of control side. So, viruses which play an essential role in the balance of the human body, can, if they come from another animal do damage. Again, if some people carry the virus whether they are aware of it or not, there is just what we call bad luck if we meet them inadvertently. When we have taken all the rational steps, we can there remains that element of sheer chance.

We take different attitude to this- some adopt a resigned fatalism, some a cheerful stoicism. But the message of the Hebrew Scriptures

goes beyond this. They urge an ultimate trust. “Underneath are the everlasting arms” as they put it, words often read at funeral services. The value of those words is that after taking all the rational, sensible precautions we can, they direct us away from worrying too much about the future to live fully in in the now. The 18th century priest Pierre de Caussade used to talk about “the sacrament of the present moment”. As we enter an ever-increasing lockdown that moment is going to be real and long. But one of the wonderful results, as so many have already experienced, is that we are discovering a new depth and compassion in life, which has already led so many people to be really concerned for those around them.