

# The Handle of Faith

## Philippians 4:6

I read last week about an engineering firm in England which had ordered its staff to wear Santa Claus hoods over the festive period. The purpose was to spread jollity and Christmas cheer amongst the firm, and presumably, amongst their customers. The penalty for anyone refusing to wear a Santa hood was the loss of their Christmas bonus.

It's Christmas. You will be happy! Or else!

And perhaps that's part of the problem. For many of us, Christmas is quite an anxious time. There's so much to be done, and so many decisions to be made. Have I remembered everyone, or have I inadvertently left out someone who's going to be awfully upset? What's the last posting day for Christmas? Did I remember to order the turkey? Money is tight and the expectations the family have set are high. The bank balance won't jive with what is expected under the tree.

But of course, it's more than that. Christmas is known to be a time of increased stress in personal relationships. I remember my sister-in-law, who is a psychologist, mentioning to me once that often her work-load is very full in January as people contend with the fall-out from this festive season.

So while we may sing "Joy to the World the Lord has come" our faces may reflect the sadness of one who has just buried a rich aunt who left everything to her pregnant hamster. Yes December accentuates the juxtaposition between the theme of joy that is everywhere present while we may feel anything but joyful.

But it's not just Christmas. Anxiety is an emotion we often feel regardless of the month. Anxiety is a thin stream of fear trickling through the mind. If encouraged, it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained. We're all anxious about something. Some of us some of the time, some of us all of the time. I would like to suggest that most often our anxiety is focused on

- things that will never happen

- things about the past that can't be changed
- criticism by others, mostly untrue
- about health, which gets worse with stress
- about real problems that need to be faced

Way back in the first century St. Paul exhorted the Philippian Christians to: "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Phil. 4:6).

The letter to the Philippians is thought to have been written round about AD 64, when Paul was in prison in Rome. He and his companions had previously been thrown out of Philippi because they'd threatened the livelihood of some important businessmen. The businessmen had a slave-girl who had some kind of 'second-sight', and they made a lot of money out of her sooth-saying. But Paul and Silas cured her and she lost her gift of fortune-telling, and thus lost her owners a fortune. So Paul and Silas were less than popular and were driven out of the city by an irate business community (Acts 16:11-40).

The hostility they generated seems to have continued towards the Christians at Philippi. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 7:5 the following about what it was like for him in Philippi "After we came to Philippi, we didn't have any chance to rest. We were faced with all kinds of problems. We were troubled by enemies and troubled by fears." But it's in this context of external hostility and the fear generated amongst the Christians by that hostility, that he says in his letter: "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Phil. 4:6). It is important to remember that though the Apostle calls us to live lives that are not to be overrun by anxiety he too knows what it is to experience anxiety. He had learned though how to live his life so that he wasn't ruled by anxiety.

I think Paul would have agreed with Dwight Eisenhower, someone else who would have known something about anxiety. Remember he was the American General who oversaw the U.S. landings on D-Day and was the U. S President during part of the 1950s. Mr. Eisenhower came to realize "Every tomorrow has two handles. We can

take hold of tomorrow with the handle of anxiety or we can take hold of tomorrow with the handle of faith.”

Paul encourages us here to take hold of tomorrow with the handle of faith.

In verse six he says that we take hold of tomorrow with the handle of faith through a life of growing intimacy with God through prayer. Prayer is not so much the means whereby God's will is bent to our desires, as it is the means whereby our will is bent to God's desires. The real end of prayer is not so much to get this or that single desire granted, as to put human life into full and joyful conformity with the will of God.

The seventeenth century French Spiritual guide, Francois Fenelon, counsels “tell God all that is in your heart, as one unloads one's heart, its pleasures and its pains, to a dear friend. Tell God your troubles, that God may comfort you; tell God your joys, that God may sober them; tell God your longings, that God may purify them; tell God your dislikes, that God may help you conquer them; talk to God of your temptations, that God may shield you from them: show God the wounds of your heart, that God may heal them. If you thus pour out all your weaknesses, needs, troubles, there will be no lack of what to say. Talk out of the abundance of the heart, without consideration say just what you think. Blessed are they who attain to such familiar, unreserved intercourse with God.”

By learning to pray this way can take hold of tomorrow with the handle of faith. As we learn to live this way we discover not only is anxiety unnecessary but we learn to rejoice. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." By learning to rejoice we are placing God at the centre and anxiety on the periphery. You will notice that Paul is emphatic here. We are called to rejoice because even though life is filled with great trials, remember Paul is under arrest as he writes this, he knows that the Lord is near. Christian joy is independent of all things on earth, because Christian joy has its source in the continual presence of Christ.

As we learn to rejoice, the result, says Paul is the diminishing of anxiety and an increase in gentleness in how we treat others and an experience of the peace of God which passes all understanding.

What are some of the symptoms of this kind of gentleness and peace. Here are 12 signs and symptoms of inner peace. One for each day of Christmas.

- A tendency to think and act spontaneously rather than on fears based on past experiences.
- An unmistakable ability to enjoy each moment.
- A loss of interest in judging other people.
- A loss of interest in interpreting the actions of others.
- A loss of interest in conflict.
- A loss of the ability to worry. (This is a very serious symptom.)
- Frequent, overwhelming episodes of appreciation.
- Contented feelings of connectedness with others and with nature.
- Frequent attacks of smiling.
- An increasing tendency to let things happen rather than make them happen.
- An increased susceptibility to the love extended by others as well as the desire to extend that love to them.
- The ability to enjoy the little things, for one day you may look back and realize they were the big things.

The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith, and the beginning of true faith is the end of anxiety. If you want to get rid of anxiety, if you want to dispel fear, begin to regularly spend five or ten minutes a day in quiet in the presence of God. And then you'll begin to know what inner peace is all about because you will be learning how to take hold of tomorrow with the handle of faith, not the handle of anxiety.