

St Luke's Virtual Clergy Wellbeing Programme

12. Use of Scriptures: a Christian approach to managing anxiety

In the third of this series of reflections on managing anxiety, Michèle Hampson helps us look for a guidance framework from Scripture that will both support us in managing our immediate anxiety and steer us as we look ahead.

It is helpful to have texts at the ready to offer others. I used to use the 'where to find help when...' section of my Gideon Bible when struggling.

You may find it helpful before reading on to consider your 'go to' Scriptures when feeling anxious or worried. What is it that you find helpful or reassuring? Which do you find difficult?

Most of us will turn to the psalms; described by Calvin as "An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul;" for 'the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.'¹

The following psalms may be particularly helpful: 30, 34, 46, 91, 116, 130.

I offer a four-part framework (the 4Gs), which relates to Calvin's tripartite division of the psalms into God's deliverance, lament and thanksgiving, but places additional emphasis on remaining grounded in the present.

1. Greatness and goodness of God

The psalms often start by reminding us of God's omnipotence and compassion; to whom we respond in praise.

Relationally we orientate ourselves to face this awesome God (as at the start of the Lord's Prayer) then recall our significance as God's adopted children (Romans 8:15); not based on our merit but by faith and grace alone. Jesus urges the disciples to have more faith when frightened by the storm; not to be more deserving or capable (Mark 4:35-41; 6:47-52).

However we are feeling, God is bigger than our difficulty and has promised to take care of us. This sets the scene.

How do I see God? What image is the most helpful right now? How is God looking at me?

2. Grounded in the present

Trauma therapists emphasise that you can only change the present; but that includes looking back and opens up future possibilities.

So we remember God's:

- promises

'But now, this is what the Lord says – he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When

¹ Calvin John, Commentary on the Psalms: Author's preface. Accessed at <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom08/calcom08.vi.html>

you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour' (Isaiah 43:1-3).

- provision (Genesis 22:14)

We are enabled by God to 'scale a wall' (Psalm 18:29) and 'can do everything through him who gives me strength.' (Philippians 4:12-13).

- protection

'God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging' (Psalm 46:1-2).

- presence

'Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' (Hebrews 13:5).

- plan

'Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up *in due time*. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you' (1 Peter 6-7).

Jesus calls us not to anticipatory anxiety but to trusting God with the present situation.

'So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own' (Matthew 6:31-34).

What do I recall God having done in my life? What are the promises I cling to in this moment?

3. Groans that God hears

Therapists know that being well heard is essential in establishing a good therapeutic relationship, which predicts a good outcome.

The psalmists are direct; they 'say it as it is' and we are assured that God hears, though we may not get the answer we desire or expect. God doesn't promise to remove our difficulty, but to be there with us. We are called to trust God's plan more than our desire, which we relinquish. Job (38-41) gained, and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane retained the focus of God's bigger picture (Luke 22:42). Job then received unexpected blessing (Job 42:10-17) and Jesus angelic support (Luke 22:43).

Having spoken we then wait for God's response.

What do I need God to hear about how I feel (including perhaps anger or distress with God)? Can I then become aware of the God who hears?

4. Gratitude

Finally, we give thanks; even if we have not yet experienced God responding to us.

Gratitude is known to reduce our stress response, improve sleep and wellbeing and reduce depressive symptoms. Writing our thanks for even five minutes brings about such benefits.

Paul writes, 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God' Phil 4:6.

How might I regularly give thanks to God? Would the Examen prayer be useful?

A difficult text

How do we interpret 'There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love' (1 John 4:18), without guilt or despair?

I regard it as aspirational; a signpost for our direction of travel, not a rod to beat our backs, already buckling with the weight of anxiety.

Do I offer myself the same compassion I give to others?

A Final Prayer

Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you,
All things are passing away:
God never changes.
Patience obtains all things
Whoever has God lacks nothing;
God alone suffices.

- St Teresa of Avila

Michèle Hampson is an honorary adult psychiatrist and priest in the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham. St Luke's is grateful for her regular contributions to this series of reflections.

If reading this has led you to want to seek additional support or signposting please contact either the person in your diocese responsible for clergy wellbeing or St Luke's via its website or on [020 7898 1700](tel:02078981700).