

Cushion Your Anxieties By Finding Peace Through Prayer

Credo – The Times, July 28, 2018

It emerged this week that when John Major was prime minister, he was so sensitive about his lack of prowess as a public speaker that he threw a cushion at an aide who had dared to offer some constructive criticism.

Have you ever been asked to give a speech at a wedding, a presentation at work or a talk to a voluntary group?

Public speaking is often listed as one of the nation's top ten greatest fears. Even the smallest public address is enough to make most of us feel a little anxious, and in others it induces far more dramatic reactions. The billionaire businessman Warren Buffett used to wrestle with public speaking so much that he would be physically sick before taking to the podium.

We all have our own fears and worries, many far more serious than public speaking. It could be that a friend or family member is seriously unwell, you are experiencing financial troubles, or your career or business is on the rocks.

Even if we haven't personally experienced these things, most of us can relate to them. Other anxieties are less well understood. Loneliness, or the experience of being surrounded by people but feeling all alone in the world, is a significant anxiety in our society.

Professor Julianne Holt-Lunstad, in her research article *Social Relationships and Mortality Risk*, explains that feeling socially isolated can be as detrimental to your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Anxiety is far from a new phenomenon. The apostle Paul acknowledged it when he wrote to the Church in the ancient city of Philippi: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6).

This was no doctrinal dictate, but words of comfort and encouragement to people who were in the depths of worry and did not know where to turn.

We all wrestle with things that have yet to happen - the what-ifs and the maybes. As I write this article there is something on my mind that is causing me anxiety and stress. I am battling with God to get on top of my concerns so they don't overwhelm me and stifle what I have to do today.

So I am comforted by the words of St Paul that I have no need to be anxious, but instead I can turn to God in prayer to find peace.

I remember the words of Winston Churchill who said: "When I look back on all these worries, I remember the story of the old man who said on his deathbed that he had had a lot of trouble in his life, most of which had never happened." The reality is that most of

our worries will never materialise - so why not save all your energy? Instead, try and find a place of peace with God and entrust your concerns to him in prayer.

It is comforting to know that people who are far more faith-filled and prayerful than us also wrestle with worry.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, admitted that he was nervous before officiating at Prince Harry's and Megan Markle's wedding in May. His admission gives us all reassurance that it's genuinely OK to struggle to trust God and pray. Stress and worry are part of being human and, as we encounter struggles in life, the only thing we often have control over is our reaction to them.

At a time of great uncertainty for Jesus's followers he said to them: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:27). Jesus promises us an inner stillness and rest which is in sharp contrast to the pressure of the world around us. It takes discipline to make this search for inner peace part of our daily lives, but, since worry will always come, it's an invaluable gift to have.

You may not be giving a speech anytime soon, but whatever worries and burdens you carry you can find God's peace through prayer.

Matt Bird is an international speaker and founder of the Cinnamon Network.