

Several years ago my brother Tom was diagnosed with cancer and agreed to have his prostate removed. The surgery went fine, and the cancer is gone. Right after surgery, Tom was groggy, but as he came to, he started talking. I said, "You must be relieved to have that cancer out of your system." He said, "I'm just relieved that the surgery is over." His surgery produced more worry than the illness it fixed. A lot of you can understand this. And if you are a fairly calm person, just try surgery sometime; you'll learn all about worry.

There are some good reasons why people should feel anxious from time to time, but we can needlessly bring anxiety on ourselves. We burden our minds with images that don't belong there. We dwell on the hurts caused when others have injured us, the jealousies we feel when love doesn't go our way, and the temptations to sin that keep us perversely entertained. Our thoughts may be hidden, but worry becomes visible. It affects how we talk, how we look, and how we act. When we're not at our best on the outside, it could be our minds are dealing with needless anxiety on the inside.

Saint Paul explains how to find peace in his letter to the Philippians. Philippi was an ancient city about the size of 10,000; its population included veterans of war and prisoners. When Paul visited there he won a number of converts, but he also made enemies who had him arrested. After he was set free, he left, but he wrote a letter back to the Philippians, and in spite of all that happened to him, he says to them almost flippantly, "There is no need to worry." That's easier said than done, but they knew what Paul had been through with them, and that he could speak from experience about worry. Paul says you can deal with it by prayer: make your requests known to God; put your cares in the hands of the One who can do something about them. This will replace worry with peace. We often repeat a sentence from this letter at the time of a funeral: "that peace of God, which is so much greater than we can understand, will guard your hearts and your thoughts, in Christ Jesus."

Paul offers an additional technique to find peace – a mental exercise: replace the thoughts that bother you with thoughts that help you. He says, "fill your minds with everything that is true, everything that is noble, everything that is good and pure, everything that we love and honour, and everything that can be thought virtuous or worthy of praise." In other words, "Count your blessings." Negative things have tremendous power. One bad experience can damage the rest of your day. One nasty person at school can ruin an entire semester. It shouldn't be this way, and it doesn't have to. But negative things have power, and if we let them inhabit our minds, they will change our outlook and our actions. Paul says don't even think about them. Think about other things. Then, he says, "the God of peace will be with you." Not just the peace of God! The God of peace will himself be with you.

It is hard to have say there is no need to worry, but we can usually get better control over our anxiety if we remember the good things that uphold us, and hand over to God the bad things that restrain us. When we do that, the God of peace will be with us too.