

A Robin

Dear all, based on a lovely photograph of a European Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*) taken just a few days ago, in a snowy tree nearby, by one of my siblings in Christ, a painting which I really needed to see just at the moment.

There are many things on my prayer list at the moment, and some of them frighten me quite a lot. Enough so that, starting a new round of living well therapy at the wonderful Arthur Rank hospice, who look after us so well, anxiety appears on my list of issues. I have to list three things which have been a particular problem in the last week, so that they have a baseline to judge whether the therapy offered has been helpful.

Normally it is pretty easy to fill in the list because PLS is characterised by painful muscle spasms and I manage the antispasmodics and painkillers as a compromise between effective control and the need to minimise the dose in order to maximise my cognitive functioning; memory and ability to problem-solve. Fatigue (the kind of tiredness that is so uncomfortable that it inhibits sleep, as opposed to the healthy tiredness one gets from a day's gardening) is another frequent visitor to the list.

When I first started going to the hospice I was terrified of dying. Not what happens after I've died, then I shall not be in distress, but I didn't know much about how people die. The hospice provided help when I asked for it and that, combined with a wonderful book, which everyone in Britain, if not the world, should read, completely demystified dying so that I am no longer worried about it at all. The book is called *With the End in Mind* and is by retired palliative care consultant Kathryn Mannix. If you have not read it, you should. I now know that at the end of life you slide gracefully into deep unconsciousness and then you are unaware of the processes in your body shutting down. Sometimes to the outside observer your body may appear distressed, but you yourself are completely, deeply and absolutely unaware, your soul quietly and calmly preparing to leave your body.

So it is many months since anxiety featured on my list of items that have affected me in the last week. And my anxiety now has nothing to do with my illness, and is doubtless an anxiety shared by millions, perhaps billions of people worldwide. It is driven by a great big long list of what-ifs, most of which find their way ultimately back to the Kremlin and Vladimir Putin. And my dear friend's little Robin, sat on a snowy branch is a reminder that we do not need to worry. Anxiety is not necessary or helpful. Easy to say, harder to do as anyone who has experienced anxiety will be well aware.

But, if I may be so bold as to start a paragraph with a conjunction, there really is no need to worry about Vladimir Putin and any of the myriad what-ifs for which he is responsible. And that is because Jesus tells us specifically, indeed, commands us, not to worry. In Matthew 6:25-27 Jesus, continuing the sermon on the mount which starts so memorably at the beginning of Chapter 5, says "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"

So, although I put 'anxiety about the future' on my form, I should perhaps have painted the Robin first, read Matthew 6:25-27, stopped worrying about everything and just relaxed and prayed about everything instead of worrying about it! Of course, the object that resides between my ears and partly on top of my eyeballs (don't think about it too much, I'm a biologist, I'm allowed to say things like that), is the most complex object in the known universe. Not mine personally, but human brains in general. Trying to tell my brain to do anything is, as Sue will undoubtedly confirm, much like

herding cats. But, praying about all that stuff, looking at the little robin in the snow covered tree and reading Matthew 6:25-27 on a daily basis, does undoubtedly work.

I place all my worries in Jesus' capable hands and get on with living without worrying. Like most bits of being a Christian it works best when repeated regularly, preferably daily, because the complexity of the brain means that, left to its own devices it falls back easily into old habits, and for me, the old habit of worry is a strong attractor. Fortunately, daily prayer and pondering the bible passage, prompted to do so by the Robin that appears on my screen every now and again as a reminder to do it and not to forget, is quite sufficient to stop me worrying. I hope that it helps you too. Love, Grace and Peace from Rick

A few details of how the photograph became a painting:

The file was quite tall compared to its width, and to optimise printing, it is better to try and aim for normal paper sizes. Of course, I used European A ratio paper sizes (A4 is the ordinary stuff you buy in the supermarket and put in your printer.) Sometimes a square painting is best, but not for this subject. It is always wise to keep anything important away from the edges of the painting because the printer likes to have a little bit of wiggle room which they call 'bleed', and if you end up with something important near the edge it might get cut off. It would take a very considerable effort have any problems with this Robin getting too close to the edge of the painting.

I could not persuade the eye to look nice using simple techniques, so I downloaded a large public domain image of a Robin which had a nice looking eye and cut that out, made it the right size and popped it into the photo before painting. Somewhat to my surprise the brush painting program made a splendid job of painting the eye, all that experimenting with cats seems to have worked.

I nearly always like to have more space in front of creatures so that they are looking into a space on the painting. This helps to achieve another goal in composing the painting. The object of the exercise is usually to try and avoid putting the main subject in the middle of the painting, where it will tend to get lost (compositionally weak). In this case it was easy as the Robin was somewhat to the right of the centre-line and somewhat below the middle of the painting from the very start. These are not absolute rules of composition and I often don't compose the painting like this at all, for very good reasons.

The tail of the little robin was right alongside a branch and very difficult to see, so I took the robin out of the public domain image and made it the same size as this robin so I could see where its tail was and how much of it one could see. I painted a fresh tail in that position down below the branch that the robin is sitting on and I think that it suits the little chap.

The final thing that I did before painting it was to lighten it and make the colour a bit brighter. I always do that and it is intrinsic to my style of painting. It is because I am on the autistic spectrum and although my eyes work just like everyone else's eyes, my brain remembers colour differently. So I remember the world as a more brightly coloured place than it actually is. Personally I think that is a rather wonderful gift, and I love the way that I see the world and how it is obviously more vibrant than for most people.

The actual painting was made using my own adaptation and configuration of a commercially available photo to paint program. I chose this configuration because experience suggested that it would work as it has done and produce a nice looking painting. I have made over a thousand different configurations of five different paint programs, so if it did not work, there are plenty of other things we can try!

Luckily, everyone did not see it when the painting program had finished with it, because the only snag with this particular configuration is that red colour tends to bleed into any white bits, and the branches turned out to have quite a bit of red in them. I spent a happy hour doing some real actual painting in the computer, using my enormous mouse, turning all the red bits of snow white or grey depending if they were in the shade or not. I don't think I missed any bits.

One other little thing I did was to make a rather unusual signature. I tried white, grey and black and all were almost invisible. Then I had a brainwave and made the signature with some red chosen at random from the Robin's red breast and that you can see. I did try Ferrari red which was amusing but inappropriate, and also a rainbow signature I made some time ago for a project on living on the autistic spectrum – you certainly could not miss the signature but it did render the robin rather superfluous, so Robin red it is.