

12th Sunday Year A 2020

Matthew 10.26-33

A few months ago, as the Covid crisis was beginning but before we had any clear sense of how great its effects would be, I found it strangely heartening to hear a Church of England bishop say that he was frightened. At the time, I expect the same was true of every one of us, to some degree or other. But I doubt many of us had the courage to admit to our fear in public, or at least in the presence of others beyond our closest family and friends. To hear someone in authority admit to the reality of fear gave a healthy permission to acknowledge how we felt, and to begin to come to terms with that feeling.

The phrase “do not be afraid”, or something like it, is the most common in all the writings of scripture. The story of the New Testament begins with a command

not to be afraid – the angels reassuring Joseph in Matthew, and Zechariah in Luke – and Jesus tells people, individually and together, over and over again to have no fear. Sometimes this is because fear is the natural response in the circumstances – Jairus is told not to be afraid despite the fact that his daughter is at the point of death; the disciples are told to have no fear when Jesus appears to them walking on the water.

This morning's gospel contains only eight verses, but in those eight verses there are three separate instructions not to be afraid. Those receiving the instructions are the disciples of Jesus, whom he is teaching about the tasks of the mission on which they will be sent. The verses immediately preceding those we heard should not really have been omitted, for they make clear that these tasks are to be done despite opposition, in the face of the enemy we might say. "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household", Jesus warns the disciples.

But then, he tells them not to be afraid of these same enemies. Opposition is real, conflict will ensue, but fear is not the way forward. There is a simple point to be made concerning the frequency of this command not to fear, and that is that if Jesus' hearers had no propensity to fear, he presumably wouldn't feel the need to keep instructing them thus. Fear seems to be part of the natural dispositions of those who encounter and follow Jesus. And fear seems to be one of the tendencies that Jesus is most anxious for his followers to abandon.

There are several reasons not to fear given in the gospel passage we have heard. The disciples should not fear their opposition, because "nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known". The reason not to fear, is future vindication, it seems. At the moment, things may seem dark, but in the times to come, everything will be made clear. Trust in that outcome is the reason not to fear. Shortly

afterwards, they are told not to fear those who can only kill the body. Much greater should be the fear of the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell – Gehenna here in Matthew, the cursed valley of human sacrifice which comes to mean the opposite of life in the Kingdom of heaven: the place of death and destruction. Here Jesus is replacing one fear for another – do not fear those who are not worthy of fear, he is saying, but do fear the reality of God’s judgement and the destructive power of the evil one. There is a place for holy fear, perhaps.

And then “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And yet not one will fall to the ground without your Father’s will. Even the hairs of your head are numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.” As before, trust in the divine providence is what Jesus is urging of his followers. If God so cares for worthless birds, will he not much more care for you? We have heard this line before, in the Sermon on

the Mount. There the imperative is “Do not worry”. Much the same point is being made.

When we are fearful, there is little comfort in simply being told to feel differently. Ordering someone not to fear, is just as likely to make that someone more afraid as less. What we need to tackle our fear is some sort of comfort, perhaps just the reassurance that we are not alone. A child who is afraid in the night doesn't need a logical explanation from beyond the bedroom door that there is no reason to worry. The child needs the presence of someone to comfort it - parent, sibling, whoever – and with that presence, can come the verbal reassurance which can then be taken on board. When Jesus walks on the water, the disciples are terrified, but although he tells them not to fear, far more important is his coming among them – a ghostly figure shouting from a distance is unlikely to help.

The presence of God in our lives is not something which comes and goes, except insofar as we are better

or worse at discerning it. There will be times when God feels close, and times when God feels distant. The old pious saying “if God feels far away, which one of you has moved?” is not really terribly helpful in times of fear or darkness. What we need is the trust which is basic to faith, and that trust – like faith itself – is as much about what we do as about how we feel in the moment. If we live as those who believe in the love of God, then we will be best placed to feel and experience that love when we need it most. But we should also be unafraid to confess that there are times when we cannot quite manage to live as we are called to live, that there will be legitimate fear, and that faith will never be without its trials.

For many of us, these last three months will have been such a time. There is nothing wrong with fearing that which we are encouraged to fear. Being warned and then instructed into altering our behaviour as radically as has been the case recently, is hardly likely to leave us feeling happy go lucky. But the very fact

that the disciples are seemingly so prone to be afraid is a source of hope for each of us. Even the genuine and holy fear which Jesus encourages in the gospel can be for us a comfort: Jesus warns that whoever denies him before men, he will also deny before his father in heaven. That specific verb translated “deny” is not used again in the gospel until it is used of Simon Peter, who denies his master so spectacularly in the hour of his greatest need. Things turned out all right in the end for Simon Peter. His denial, as great as could be imagined, did not prevent his being the vehicle of God’s mission and the leader of the church.

He was afraid, and he was ashamed. But he was redeemed. It is not an accident that those who go first to the tomb on that first Easter morning, are told quite clearly “Do not be afraid”.