

Midnight Mass 2016

Fr Peter Groves

And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid

Fear sells so many newspapers. Fear the person who looks different from us, fear the person who speaks another language, fear the person whose opinions are not the same as ours. Fear them, and then find comfort in the thoughts and the ideas which reinforce our fear, rejoice in our fear as the guarantee of being right, celebrate our fear by paying more and more for more and more fear and more and more false security. Fear sells so many newspapers.

And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid."

Fear wins so many votes. Fear the insecurity of our finances, fear the bleak prospects of the year to come, fear the hike in the rent and the rise in the prices, fear the impossibility of the future, fear the inability to return to the past, fear the development and change which might actually help us, because change is frightening and fear reminds us to turn in on

ourselves, to hide our heads under the pillow, to snatch at the desperate hope that if we simply deny something for long enough then it will cease to be true. Fear truth, because truth is not real, the only thing which is real is the fear and the blame of others. Fear wins so many votes.

And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid".

Fear fills so many screens. The thrill of being scared which entertains us, the gruesome projection of so much which terrifies us, sanitized and made safe by being literally projected in our cinemas and into our living rooms and on our desks and in our hands and through our ears. The dangerous normality of violence, a frightening part of each one of us, turned into something which belongs elsewhere, to someone else, to a world which we can observe but need not enter. The fear of boredom met by incessant electronic drivel, the fear of loneliness met by virtual relationships which promise so much and yet threaten so darkly as, every now and then, power and control and exploitation are revealed for what they are, lurking insidiously behind our screens so much more pernicious and deceitful

behind their curtain than ever was the charlatan psychic or the Wizard of Oz. Fear fills so many screens.

And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid."

Fear blights so many lives. The fear of disappointment, the fear of not being better, the fear of rejection, the fear of affection, the fear of commitment. The fear of the shells and the bombs and the gunshots which drive desperate people from their desperate homes. The fear of grief and agony in what passes for a hospital in the middle of the war zone. The fear of hatred and murder in the simple act of Christmas shopping, the fear of the gun in the fearful suburban neighbourhood, the fear of spite and discrimination and assault and degradation because we speak Polish in public or dare to wear a headscarf. Fear blights so many lives.

And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid".

Who wants to be afraid? In reality, none of us does. Fear sends us away seeking security, turning to size and power and wealth in the hope of protection, turning on the other to find myself an identity, joining the gang because the gang is the only thing to join. No-one wants to be afraid. But the shepherds are afraid. They are terror stricken, cowering petrified beneath the blinding light. And the angel said to them, “Be not afraid”. But the angel did not say to them “Be not afraid, for this is not real.” The angel did not say to them “Be not afraid, for it’s not your fault”. The angel did not say to them, “Be not afraid, for there is someone else to blame.” The angel said to them “Be not afraid, for I bring you good news of a great joy.”

This news, whatever it is, is a reason not to be afraid. This joy, whatever it is, overcomes our instinct to fear. “Be not afraid”. Be not afraid, for the one who comes to save is born among you. Be not afraid, for the King, the ruler, the Lord’s anointed, is come to you and all peoples. Be not afraid because God himself is born into the world and comes to take your part, to live your life, to walk with you, to stand by you. Be not afraid, for God is with us.

Be not afraid, says the angel. And what is the sign that we might not be afraid? How will we know that this is the case? God will tell us, God will show us where he is to be found. We will find him, because he has come among us. Not in the palaces of the King who fears his coming. Not in the temples of the ones who guard his house. Not in the genteel respectability of the restaurant or the dinner party, not on the raised platform of the high table or the tribal safety of the football terrace. Not in the lineage of the aristocracy, not in the wealth of the plutocracy, not in the promised threat of violence, not in the lifeless grasp of greed.

God will show us where he is to be found. In the ludicrous poverty of the manger, in the draught of the outhouse, in the stink of the animals, in the mess of the droppings, in the cold of the night, in the pain of the mother, in the anxiety of the father, in the frenzy of the crowd, in the orgy of bureaucracy, in the panic of the census. God will show us where he is to be found.

Be not afraid, because this is the news, the good news, the only news, the news of great joy. That God is among us grasping at our fear, pulling us away from the screens and the media and

the politicians and the lies, pulling us away from power and strength and violence and fear, turning us around, turning us to one another, showing everything anew. Showing us true power in the weakness of a baby, banishing our fear in the helplessness of love. Telling us the truth in the eloquence of weeping, speaking all too clearly in the crying of a child.