

Sermon for 21<sup>st</sup> June

Matthew 10: 24 – 39

Fear Not

Over the last few months the word 'fear' has become quite prevalent. Fear of the coronavirus by those who are particularly vulnerable, fear of staying in or fear of going out; fear of saying the wrong thing on twitter; fear experienced by our black community as they have faced years of prejudice; fear of the far right; fear of being misunderstood as we have communicated from a distance; and fear of a world which is undergoing significant change – economic, political and social.

All of us lock our houses, encourage children to beware of strangers, guard our internet passwords, and hopefully take care when helpful people ring us up and volunteer to fix our computer. Fear has increasingly become part of life.

Sometimes we call our fear – worry. During the day we concentrate on our work and we react sharply when challenged over the slightest thing. We are so distracted by our fears and worries that we find it impossible to take time to listen to our spouses, friends and families at the end of the day. When we finally go to bed, we toss and turn, our minds are in a whirl, our thoughts dash from one concern to another, the ache of anxiety grabs at our hearts – and we can't sleep. Our whole life has been turned upside down because of our fears.

Know the feeling?

There are many things which blot out the sunshine and joy and peace in our lives and fill it with uncertainty, gloom and fear and with the current situation it is no wonder that we are concerned. Our work, our family, our health, our finances, our future, perhaps things we have done or said or not done or said. Try as we might we just can't find a way out of the fear. Even though we have tried to ignore it and pretend its not there, nothing has helped. It keeps on coming back, but to have fear, worry and anxiety and doubt is not the way God wants us to be.

A businesswoman went on holiday to an island in Greece. One day, while she was on the beach, she came across a fisherman, dozing in the shade of his fishing boat that had been pulled up on the beach.

As the woman passed, the fisherman woke up and she decided to talk to him.

"The weather is great and there's lots of fish. So how come you are sitting about here when you could be out there catching more fish?"

Quietly, the fisherman replied: "Because I caught enough this morning"

"But just imagine" the businesswoman replied "If you went out twice a day, you could bring home twice as much fish and do you know what could happen?"

Puzzled, the fisherman shook his head.

"Well" the woman continued - waxing lyrical to her theme "you could buy yourself a motorboat. And then, after say a couple of years you could buy a second one. Then perhaps after three years you could have a cutter or two. And just think, one day you might be able to buy a freezing plant. Then you could go on to get your own helicopter to help you trace shoals of fish for your fishing fleet. You could then buy your own truck to ship the fish to the capital thereby cutting out the middle manager"

"And then what" the fisherman replied.

“And then” the woman concluded triumphantly “you would not have to worry. You could then sit down calmly on the beach, dozing in the sun and looking at the beautiful ocean.”

“ Well, my friend” the fisherman replied, “what do you think I am doing now!”

Jesus, we read, in St Matthew’s gospel sent his disciples out to preach the Good News that the kingdom of God is near. Some scriptural texts are harder to handle than others, particularly those that depict that the followers of Jesus would suffer trials, betrayals, threats and even death. Christ recognised that following him would result in conflict and that when the disciples ran into inevitable opposition, they would be afraid. He realised that they would worry.

And so Jesus said to his disciples: “Do not fear.... (Mt. 10:31), because God is interested in the smallest details of your life and won’t let you down”.

Recently I read somewhere that the words ‘fear’ and ‘afraid’ appear in one form or another over 700 times in scripture. And the article went on to say that the recommended coping mechanism to deal with both ‘fear’ and ‘afraid’ can be found in one single word....‘faith’.

That’s very true isn’t it? Faith in God’s power to save, deliver, provide and protect allows each one of us to deal with our fears. Yet, it is difficult to rely on faith alone when the world is like it is, and we are reminded of it every day. I certainly am having to remind myself that God is in control every day at the moment.

Jesus knew that his followers, and that includes us today, would come up against opposition; that both the movement of time and the radical new order which Christ brings with its message of love and freedom, would challenge structures. There would always be those who would actively seek to silence the spread of the Good News of forgiveness and salvation, just as they tried to silence Jesus himself.

There is an old proverb that goes something like this: Fear less, hope more, eat less, chew more; whine less, breathe more; talk less, say more; hate less, love more; and all good things will be yours. It’s no accident that ‘fear less’ is top of the list. It was also high of Jesus’ list of priorities.

The children’s writer Dr Seuss has written a story entitled ‘*Horton hears a Who*’. It’s a children’s story about an elephant named Horton, who tries to protect a tiny world full of little creatures called ‘*Whos*’ from destruction. Horton is the only one who can hear the ‘*Whos*’ so all the other animals think Horton is mad. The theme that is stated over and over again throughout the story is this: *A person is a person, no matter how small.*

Jesus may have warned his small band of disciples that as far as the world was concerned often they would be ‘nobodies’ but really they had everything and by way of illustration Jesus declared that not even a sparrow falls to the ground without God’s notice. Even the hairs of our heads are counted, he said. The smallest things don’t escape God’s attention.

We are valuable to God regardless of what anyone else says. Jesus draws our attention to the sparrows that were sold in the marketplace for food. They were very small birds and brought only a very small price. Clearly, they were not very important however God takes notice of every individual sparrow. Not one falls to earth without the involvement of the heavenly Father. God is not so busy running the universe that he hasn’t got the time for small sparrows!

God is interested in the tiniest detail of the lives of his people. When a hair drops from our heads we hardly notice it or are concerned by it (particularly at the moment!), but our heavenly Father knows. It follows then if God cares for the humblest members of creation and since he has knowledge of even the most insignificant details of his people, then we

have no need to be afraid. Christ is not saying that there will be a stop to the things that will hurt us, but that we are in the Father's hands, and that misfortune only fills us with fear when we fail to trust in our heavenly Father,

St Paul expressed this same strong feeling that God has for us when he said to the Romans 'If God is for us, who can be against us? Who can separate us from the love of God in Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.' Romans 8: 31 – 39 Any of these things that Paul mentions could cause us to worry and to be afraid. But "no", he says, "Come what may, we have God on our side. We have a God who loves and will never let us go".

What a release from fear it is to know that God is on our side. Why do we fear about the future so much? Why are we anxious and afraid? The answer is simple because we forget to trust in our heavenly Father, who not only cares for sparrows, but who knows every detail of our lives and will walk with us through whatever it is that fills our hearts with fear. In fact, God cares so much he became human, shared his life with all the fears, doubts, frustrations, worries and tensions human beings experience and did this so that he could set us free. He died and rose again to lift the worry and fear from us, and to clearly show us the beauty and glory of God's love and forgiveness and tender care. He even forgives us for our lack of trust!

Yes, it is as we trust God, as we take his forgiving and guiding hand in ours, and each day, as we hand over our fears and worries to him through prayer, that we can be confident as we face the future and the unknown.

'A person is a person' Horton said, 'no matter how small'. That goes for all the nameless faces in the crowd of humanity, from the war victims of our hurting world to the malnourished of our needy world, from the innocent victims of prejudice, to the elderly individual in a nursing home. It goes for you and me, as well. 'Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.'