

Control the tiger and live

St Philip's Anglican Church
Third Sunday after Pentecost—25 June 2017
Reverend Martin Johnson

Genesis 21.8-21; Psalm 86.1-10,16-17; Romans 6.1-11; Matthew 10.29-39

Last Sunday we gave thanks for the Holy Communion and we reflected on our sacramental life. In essence, what I said was that the sacraments are more than signs or symbols: they “work” and they derive their power through sacrifice. The self-offering of Jesus is life-giving and it is through the sacrament that we receive this life. What I suggested was that the self-offering of Jesus on one level brings sacrifice to an end. Our own sacrifices are linked with those of Jesus; “through him” we offer our sacrifice of ourselves, our souls and bodies. Our sacrifices are those of praise and thanksgiving at what has been achieved for us. In the sacrifice of Jesus, things have changed for ever. This week I would like us to explore this further. Those of you who were here last week are now wondering why it took me so long just to say that!

Anyway, during the week, I sat down and watched the movie “Life of Pi”; it was an intriguing story. I’m still trying to work out what it was all about. I haven’t read the book—perhaps that would help me gain a greater understanding—but, at the moment, I can speak only about the movie. Perhaps I should say, for those of you that have not seen the movie or read the book, (spoiler alert!) it is about a family in India who run a zoo; the main character is the teenage son. The family decide to move to Canada and they take the animals with them; a complete menagerie; it’s like Noah’s ark. En route to Canada, the ship sinks and our young man finds himself in a lifeboat with a hyena, an orangutan, a zebra and a Bengal tiger. Eventually it is just the teenager and the tiger left. I won’t say anymore other than to say that, for me, the story was about how the young man coped with fear, and he had a bit to deal with. Just imagine being marooned on a lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean with an adult Bengal tiger who was becoming increasingly hungry!

It’s the perfect scenario in which to explore fear! In this context, it was fear that kept the young man alive in the lifeboat. The fear of the tiger was greater than the fear of dying of thirst or starvation or of being alone ... so he controlled the tiger and lived.

Fear is perhaps the most primal of our emotions, it can drive us to great acts of courage and bravery but it can also bring out in us our less noble traits. Poor Sarah in today’s reading from Genesis is frightened for her future and that of her son Isaac; driven by jealousy, Sarah sends away her slave Hagar who has borne a son, Ishmael to her husband Abraham. For her, in her day and for us in different ways fear is crucial to survival; however, problems arise when we create fear to manipulate or coerce. As Machiavelli said, “love and fear can hardly exist together; if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved.” For centuries, the warrior kings would keep power by putting people in fear of their lives. The Church did the same by putting them in fear of their souls.

What a society often does when it is fearful is create scapegoats; they are never hard to find. Dwight Eisenhower once said, “The search for a scapegoat is the easiest of all hunting expeditions.” In the Old Testament Book of Leviticus we can read of an ancient ritual in which an animal, usually a goat, is driven into the wilderness, carrying with it the sins of the people. We can find this happening again in the gospels: in John we read that Caiaphas the high priest says to the council regarding Jesus: “You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” Jesus becomes the scapegoat; there is fear of what his movement will do:

upset the status quo; he must be driven out, given over to the authorities. The Romans keen to keep the peace, their *Pax Romana*, happily coalesced with the Council and we know the result.

Today's gospel reading from Matthew presents us with some of the more difficult words of Jesus. In fact the whole of chapter 10 is tough. Jesus has called the twelve around him and named them and given them authority, but this authority comes at a cost. It is not the authority they might think it is. He tells them that he has indeed not come to bring peace but division. This seems to contradict what we understand about Jesus' mission, the one whom the angels proclaimed at his birth with "peace on earth." Yes, peace, but not gained the way we might think. This is not peace at all costs. This is the peace that passes all understanding. Peace is so often kept by those in authority and power by ensuring there is fear in the population and, in some cases, individuals or groups become scapegoats to enable this fear to be given free rein. It's an artificial or superficial peace.

Jesus' death, his sacrifice, removes the power of scapegoating. He becomes the ultimate scapegoat. But, because he is completely innocent, the power of scapegoating is removed. Thereby hangs perhaps the meaning behind Jesus' warning of division. We can no longer find scapegoats and point the finger. We can no longer blame others, we can longer engender fear to maintain order. This peace that we are called to bring is to be maintained not by fear, but by love—and Jesus knows this will be difficult. He knows that there will be division. As Machiavelli said. "It is far safer to be feared than loved." But Jesus calls his disciples to life and to lead God's people in this way, and he calls us to do the same. It is not always safe, but we are not promised safety—take up your cross.

Not many of us will find ourselves in a boat with a tiger, but we will find ourselves being fearful at times and we will need to determine whether our fear is well-founded or based on ignorance. Clearly Jesus was telling his disciples that all they had to fear ultimately was the final separation from the source of all life.

All too often, society looks for ways to assuage its fears, sometimes by pointing fearfully to those who are likely to upset our comfort and challenge our thinking or our status quo. Jesus says we are not to fear them. We are to love, as we are told: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." We must be mindful of that which is really fearful, we too must control the tiger and live. Amen.