

Fear

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1 Samuel 17:1-49; Psalm 9:9-20; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

Be scared, be very scared. Today we're going to be exploring the topic of **fear**. I'm hoping you might find at least something in all of this of some practical use, because fear is one of those things that often interferes with our daily lives, sometimes in ways we don't see. But it's also an important topic for us psychologically and spiritually too. Fear is usually a major blocker to our happiness and personal development. And fear is also a cause of sin, and a major obstacle to love and to our longer term Christian goal of transformation into becoming free and transfigured beings.

Let's start with a bit of an experiment. I'm going to ask you to please shut your eyes and to try to visualise a little scenario. Please keep those eyes shut until I ask you to open them, and let's see how good your imagination is! Alright. Please imagine that a 6 foot long snake, about as thick as my arm, has just slithered in through the sliding door at the back of the church. It's shiny and black and now it's slithering up slowly and over the childrens' stuff. Its tongue is flickering. Oh, now it's just disappeared in behind one the pews. I can't quite see where.

OK. Open your eyes now. What was your immediate reaction? Even though I invented this example, I still managed to give myself the creeps with this one! If this had really happened, I think I'd be instinctively jumping straight up onto a pew, and then not long after that I'd probably be thinking something like, ok, how do we kill this snake. The adrenalin would be pumping.

This shows us straight away some of the immediate effects of fear. On the plus side, we can see how it has some use in giving us the adrenalin to freeze, or run away or fight when threats appear. And there is an energy surge in which we suddenly become much more intense and focussed for a short period of time. Actually, I think this is why some people like action sports and horror movies. They get a buzz from the intensity and focus.

But this example also shows up some of the potential problems too. After the immediate threat has passed, and maybe even during the crisis, that fear response is has some real downsides.

Our instincts to freeze, flee or fight might have been of evolutionary use in the jungle, but they often don't work that well in a complex, modern society. And, despite the antics of Hollywood action heroes, these fear responses actually tend to lower our ability to think clearly and perform well in difficult circumstances. We become tight and tense. Remember when you were trying to learn a how to ride a bike. The moment of breakthrough came when you stopped panicking, learned to relax and got the hang of the thing.

And our sense of reality and our rationality become distorted. One reason for getting you to close your eyes is that hopefully you noticed this fear amplification effect. We didn't know what was going on and the mind in a fearful state quickly starts thinking the worst. A fearful person is very prone to speculation — and this is likely to be negative. It's very hard to think straight, and come up with creative or rational solutions, and to think about longer-term consequences. And fear, also sometimes called 'lack of confidence', can also stop us doing lots of things we might otherwise want to do as well. Think of stage fright and its many other cousins.

And if fear lasts we end up with the effects of stress and worry which in turn leads to other problems. Stress can generate illnesses or makes existing ones worse. It can lead to phobias and panic attacks. And in fact, intense fear can even kill people outright. Think of indigenous communities where poisoning the bone actually had this effect. Our minds are more powerful than we usually give them credit for. Faith may move mountains. But misdirected faith can be powerful too.

These kinds of psychological effects happen at both an individual and group level. The western world's response to the whole 9/11 incident has been interesting. What happened that day was horrible. But the intent of the terrorists — whose stated aim was to prod the West's collective fear response and trigger a totally disproportionate reaction — seems so far to have been very successful. This has perhaps not been helped by western politicians some of whom seem to have been very willing to tap into this particular mother load of fear in their voting populations. Iraq, restrictions on civil liberties, children in detention centres. I could go on ...

All this should, maybe, get us thinking about the relationship between fear and sin and what we can do about all of this. While rational caution is useful (up to a point), spiritually speaking, fear is almost a complete disaster.

Did you notice with my snake experiment that a really early reaction was a major contraction of the heart? The focus on the snake threat shrinks our mental and emotional world pretty much down to that one thing. Almost all other considerations get pushed aside. Where is love, or kindness, or gentleness, or self-control, or any of those gifts of the Spirit, when we're in the grip of intense fear? We become focussed on the snake-as-threat and the need for it to be eliminated. Now.

And even with less intense fear this maybe helps explain why we behave in unattractive ways. Maybe the quintessential examples come from Jesus' own Passion story.

Why, for example, do you think St Peter denied Jesus three times? The root cause surely was fear. Peter's dishonesty in saying he said he didn't know Jesus, knowing this to be untrue, was probably to save being caught, to save face, and maybe on that strange night of Jesus' arrest everything seemed different and scary. Actually, we're trained from a very early age to be dishonest. Even if your parents tried to bring you up not tell lies, they also rewarded you for creating a 'good impression' and probably punished you for doing things, or showing evidence of even thinking things, they regarded as 'bad' as well. Since as children we didn't want punishment and humiliation, and because we probably feared the withdrawal of acceptance and approval, we had some huge incentives to conform and to hide our true feelings. Just like St. Peter.

And why did Pilate put Jesus to death? Not because Pilate thought Jesus was guilty. Rather, Pilate was scared of what the crowd might do, and how this would play back in Rome.

Jesus' experience on the Cross is largely about fear too, although I think he is trying to teach us through his actions that these can all be confronted and passed through. "Here, take my hand, we can face this together. I already have."

Interestingly, maybe the one time in his life Jesus seems to have been affected by fear is near the beginning, in Gethsemane, when he faces the big one — the fear of anticipation, the speculation about what bad things might happen, and what it might be like. And this idea that speculation is where much of the problem with fear comes from in itself carries a big lesson.

But then after Jesus makes his choice to proceed, he almost calmly looks into the heart of each one of our big fears and almost ticks them off as they all relentlessly roll over him. He confronts our fears of being abandoned by our friends, of being betrayed, that we will be

treated unjustly, or misrepresented. Then he takes on our fears of failure, of losing all our possessions (material and mental) and being left naked and lonely; of being subjected to tortures; and of intense physical pain. There's the fear of being held up to ridicule and humiliation; of seeing our loved ones grieving and fearing for what might happen to them. Of being hungry and thirsty. Of losing our sense of God and anything transcendent in life. And of course the lurking fear of death and the abyss of non-existence.

And in a great deal of subsequent Christian theology about what the cross means we also see other unstated fears. For example, one reason we ask for forgiveness relying on the cross is because many of us deep down have an often unacknowledged fear that we don't really deserve love, and are not 'good enough'. If we don't smell the reek of fear hanging over the entire Passion story, we are missing a lot of the point.

Sorry for going on like this, but hopefully we're starting to sense the scale and range of the problem. We are in large part creatures formed by fear-based conditioning. A lot of what has driven that conditioning are layers and layers of fears that we no longer even see. Who we think we are is in large part an internalised image of what we are afraid of losing or being criticised for.

And all these unseen fears, and having to live up to this self-image, holds us in a kind of bondage. It makes us behave badly. And then it makes us feel guilty. It provides a good deal of the energy for other unattractive desires and urges too. Things like avarice and envy and anger and so on. And it's a large part of our desire to be in control and not let go. Is it any wonder that we often feel trapped and inadequate? Oh to be free of it all. How?

There are lots of books around on this topic and by all means dip into some of those for tips if you want (but please keep a critical edge!). Today's gospel story from St Mark about the calming of the storm happens to have some particularly deep and profound Christian teachings on this topic, if we listen to it in the right way.

Last week Rebecca gave us a wonderful sermon about parables and she made the observation that Jesus taught almost exclusively in parables. And that is mainly true of his *verbal* teachings — certainly he is not a teacher who gives lectures, or set things out analytically in long lists. That's maybe one reason why modern westerners, unlike earlier societies, seem to have some difficulty 'tuning in' into Jesus. We are as a culture very verbal, and very analytical.

But Jesus did teach in other ways too, as we will see in today's gospel. They are largely non-verbal but perhaps even more powerful for that very reason.

A good place to start is to think about this Sea of Galilee which is a central player in this story. Why was Jesus — the Saviour of the world — born near this place, and why did he spend so much time with these back country people, zotting around this rather odd lake? Three years ago it finally dawned on me (quietly and unbidden — as these things should be) that the Sea of Galilee is an inland sea. One constantly fed and refreshed by the great and holy River Jordan, and which in turn is drained by it. What a symbol of the soul that is! And who is it that Jesus calls to be his disciples? They are almost all fisherman of this inland sea. And isn't that what all spiritual seekers are? Fishermen of the inland sea of our own mind and souls? And what did Jesus spend most of his ministry doing? Yes, he spent most of it travelling around this inland sea, gradually transforming the people and communities that surrounded it. Waking up the ignorant with the truth. Healing the sick. Calling for change. That's what is happening with the disparate parts of my soul, I hope. A large part of Jesus teachings are tied up with his incarnation. The human form he took, including where and

when he lived, is important and adds depth to everything. But these are things we need to feel our way into with our hearts, rather than analyse with our heads.

Given our theme today is fear, let's pick up our story when Jesus is taken into the boat by the disciples. We are specifically told that he goes in "as he was" — which is an odd and unnecessary add-on. But I have this feeling that that's there for a reason : one of Jesus' defining characteristics was that he, unlike us, really was most of the time, just as he was. No pretensions, without deceit, just taking each moment as it came. Maybe this is why he seems to be totally relaxed on what turns out to be a rough journey — and in itself gives a lesson in how we might deal with fear.

Then unexpectedly a great windstorm arises from nowhere and waves come crashing into the boat. This sort of thing happens, often when we least expect it, even, and maybe especially, on journeys of change. We can feel as if we are only just holding on. Miles from land and bailing. Scared.

And of course it's only now that we are told that Jesus has gone to sleep in the back of the boat, and is still there! Oh great. I think if I had been in the boat I might have been tempted at this point to shake Jesus awake, whatever his status, and say "look you, wake up and help, we're going under!" In St Matthew's version of the story, that is in fact, pretty much what the panicked disciples did.

But in today's — much more interesting (and older) — version from St Mark the disciples in fact ask Jesus a question as they wake him up : "Teacher" (they say politely) "do you not *care* that we are perishing?". The key word in this question is "care". When we are in trouble — yes, of course we would like to be saved. But at another deeper level, I have this feeling that often what is even more important to us is whether anyone or anything, including God or existence, actually gives a hoot about who we are, and what happens to us.

It gets even more interesting. Jesus doesn't directly answer the disciples big and reasonable question. Rather he does something very unexpected. He gets up, and tells the wind off. And then Jesus talks to the sea. The words he uses to the disturbed inland sea are normally translated as the rather calm sounding "Peace" and "Be still". In fact, the Greek words are *siapa* and *phimo'o* and are perhaps more accurately translated as: "be quiet" and, weirdly, "be muzzled". Jesus is telling the turbulent inland sea to shut up!

For the denouement of this story Jesus then asks the disciples two perfect, and perfectly timed, questions : "Why are you so fearful?" and "How is it that you have no faith?"

I hear that question to the disciples "Why are you so afraid?" as both comforting, and inviting a deeper response. For that reason, it's an excellent practical thing to think about doing when you find yourself afraid. Try and put the fear to one side and ask yourself, 'why am I afraid?'. You may find this helps take the focus off the fears and puts them somewhere more constructive. The rather forensic edge comes when you realise, though, that to answer Jesus' question properly, you need first to know *what* it is you are afraid of, and then what the *causes* of that fear are. As we discussed earlier, we are all creatures shaped by our conditioning. So trying to figure out precisely what our fears are and their causes is likely sooner to take us inwards. And shows us that this is another one of those deep and redemptive questions. Sooner or later the question "why are you afraid" is going to have us looking at the core of who we think we are, and at some of our biggest internal blockers, and some of our most treasured delusions about ourselves.

And Jesus' second question "*how is it* that you have no faith?" is the perfect companion on this exploration because it points us towards how fear is so much a lack of trust. This question invites us to explore the ways in which our trust is lacking and to think about the alternatives.

Fear drives out faith. Faith can also push back the veil of fear. So finding out the ways in which we are not faithful is totally useful! Remember my example before of learning to ride a bike. At the beginning we kind of take it on trust because other people can, even though it feels scary and we just don't get it. Then finally we get the sense of it and start to move forward, upright, if a bit wobbly — just how we're not quite sure and our confidence takes a great leap forward. Hopefully there will be no looking back. Faith slowly pushes out fear.

There is one last important aspect of today's gospel story I want to mention today. In banishing the storm, Jesus also revealed the great calm. This was not any old quieting down of a storm. Once the storm was banished a *great* calm appeared, a *megas galene* in the greek. I like to think of this as a perfect, mirror-still sea bathed the golden evening light. It's there that we find the freedom of a perfect stillness in which there is a deep joy and understanding beyond words. In the place where love manifests once fear is banished.

Is it any wonder that the disciples then actually experience a different type of fear. Well, maybe not 'fear'. We are told they were awe-struck and wondered "who can this be, that even the wind and sea obey him". As we feel our way into that boat on that still perfect, golden evening, maybe as the gentle hush of a beautiful night is descending, maybe we will feel in the depths of our being, that we have truly come out the other side with some true insight into the nature of ourselves and existence, and feel how it is possible that a holy and blessed awe can replace forever all of our small petty personal fears.

I'd like to finish up with the words of a great Charles Wesley hymn. Although it's an Advent hymn it sums up a great deal of what I have been saying, and unusually, but nicely, gives equal billing to the problem of fear, as well as sin. It starts like this:

*Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free,
From our sins and fears release us, let us find our rest in thee*

Amen to that.