

# Fear of Loss

Sermon for the 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 7 August 2022  
St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Genesis 15: 1-6; Psalm 33: 13-21; Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16; Luke 12: 32-40

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Fear of loss is a big issue. I'm not talking about the prudence that makes us responsible stewards of our resources, taking proper care that we have adequate insurance and enough superannuation. Instead, I'm talking about something else: about fear of losing ground financially, which translates into losing status. I'm talking about resenting those we could once reliably look down on who're now getting ahead of us. I'm talking about fear of slipping behind.

This fear of loss is evident in today's widespread politics of grievance. The white working class in America, but also hard working but low-income families in Australia, can become resentful because their circumstances are going backwards. In America this fear of losing ground is a fear of losing status in the face of undeserving others, especially those receiving government handouts: African Americans, single mothers and immigrants. This sense of grievance, carefully

stoked by the Murdoch media, drives many in America's white working class into the arms of Trump. While over here, Pauline Hanson is still complaining about all the attention that first nations people are getting, which is apparently at the expense of white Australia. There's no graciousness here, no largeness of soul, just frustrated, rivalrous, mean-spiritedness. It's an alternative version of the identity politics that they despise on the political left.

Jesus doesn't hate us for being like this, but he does understand the problem. And in today's gospel he gets to the root of it, offering us a way out. As our good shepherd he comforts and reassures his little flock that God is pleased to give us the kingdom. Hence, fearing for lost advantage and status hardly makes sense. As the nineteenth-century Evangelical leader Charles Simeon put it, why quibble about pennies when we have pounds to our credit that we haven't earned?

As is so often his way, Jesus is friendly rather than harsh or judgemental in the way he delivers this message, with his quip about making purses that don't wear out. His call to give alms is a call to demonstrate our freedom from this fear of loss, and that we no longer resent others for undeserved advantage at our expense—the opposite of Pauline Hanson resenting first nations Australians. Jesus is inviting us to be free people, which also means generous people,

rather than aggrieved, resentful people—because the fearful are not normally generous.

What delivers us from this mood of fearfulness, this fear of missing out, is coming to trust God as our best hope for securing our ultimate future, along with our identity and our sense of worth.

In the Old Testament story of Abraham, the father of faith trusts God for the gift of children, and hence for his legacy. Something Israel was meant to realise with fertility stories like this is that the fertility deities of the Ancient Near East are not their best bet. All that sacred assisted reproductive technology that you get in pagan societies, along with temple prostitutes serving the fertility gods and goddesses, is being put on notice. The best bet for our future, and for preserving our status, is with the Lord—the Lord whose eye is on those who fear him, who trust in his unfailing love, as our Psalm reminds us. This is the faith that our Hebrews reading celebrates: faith in a God who may not be visible but who we come to know and trust nonetheless, as Abraham and Sarah did.

Jesus goes on in today's Gospel to suggest a different way to view ourselves and the meaning of our life. Instead of fearful and resentful free agents who have to secure our own advantage, Jesus invites us to reimagine ourselves as slaves of a gracious master.

Trusted by this master, we want to remain awake and alert, in case we miss him when he comes, when he requires something of us, or has something for us. And this isn't a threat—rather, it's an opportunity. Jesus is this master; “his bondage is freedom, his service is song”, as the hymn puts it. Jesus is this master, who washes his disciples' feet, who dies in resolute solidarity with the least and the despised, and who in so doing completely upends the fearfulness that breeds grievance and resentment. Jesus is this master who, true to his promise in today's Gospel, is at the service of his little flock here in the Eucharist, where he “gives himself with his own hand”, as the old Eucharistic hymn puts it.

So, instead of lost advantage in the world of dog eat dog, what we Christians should fear is lost opportunities in the life of faith. Jesus might pass us by unnoticed when we're pawing at our smartphones as if our lives depended on it, or medicating ourselves against a persistent sense of disappointment, or nursing grievances against others. The American nation and the American churches are full of this bad attitude, oblivious to the fact that Jesus is gently but firmly putting a whole toxic worldview on notice. It's the very opposite of Christian faith, and it's not unknown over here, either.

The Lord be with you ...