

## *Fears*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost—25 August, 2024

Revd Rob Miners

This morning, I begin with a story from Ken Duncan, the famous Australian photographer. This is taken from his book, *Stories for the Soul*. And I think the Lord has assured me that I am to use Ken's story this morning.

I have on my study wall a huge photo Ken took, called *High Country*. His name has come up about five times in the last fortnight and, on the ABC, there he was sitting around a table with others being interviewed. So, from *Stories for the Soul*:

When I'm travelling in America, people often pick up on my accent and tell me they would love to come to Australia, but they believe we have too many dangerous animals. It's true, we do have a few nasties, but they rarely bother you unless you do something silly.

For example, if you swim in an area inhabited by saltwater crocodiles, then you could have a problem on your hands or on any other part of your anatomy those primeval monsters take a liking to. But if you take reasonable care and show a little respect around crocodiles, you're fine. Crocodiles don't venture far from water. They can only run fast in a straight line on land, and they don't climb trees.

Not so the American grizzly bear. That animal is one keen, mean, fighting machine. But he can run faster than a horse. He can also swim and climb trees. It seems the only thing he can't do is fly and that's not much comfort because neither can I.

I went with a friend into Denali National Park in Alaska to photograph Mount McKinley. In preparation for the trip, I tried to find out as much as possible about mountain biking, backpacking, and camping out in bear country and how to deal with any other hazards we might encounter. All the people I spoke to kept drawing my attention to one thing. Grizzly bears. One well-meaning advisor told me that if they run at you, they might simply be testing to see if you run. So, whatever you do, you shouldn't run. Apparently, bears like to play chicken. He went on to say that if the bear keeps running, you should curl up in a ball and play dead. If he keeps attacking, then you must fight back. What a fine thought. Hand-to-hand combat with a grizzly. I know who I put my money on. On and on went the horror stories about people being mauled by bears, even dragged from their tents, and many people suggested we should carry a gun.

It's amazing how fear can creep in and try to stop you fulfilling your destiny. Fear can be healthy in certain situations, like preparing us for fight or flight. But that nagging worry of "What if a bear comes" can be a total waste of time and energy. Sure, it's good to have knowledge. I have learned that preparation helps avoid desperation. But in the end, the journey must go on. And it doesn't make sense to let fear put fences around our dreams.

We must trust in something bigger or we will always be living in the smallness of our emotions. I told our informant we would put our trust in God and he would look after us. In the end, we settled for bear bells and decided we'd make as much noise as possible on our way through the park so as not to surprise a dozing grizzly.

Although we had no problems with bears, we did meet up with another of Denali National Park's infamous residents. We had just finished shooting a full moon at sunrise over Wonder Lake. Wonder is the perfect name for this lake as the beauty of God's creation touched me deeply and is an experience I will always carry in my heart.

We had made our way back to the bikes and I was just strapping the tripod onto the carrier rack when I saw my friend, his eyes as big as saucepans, looking over towards another small lake and mumbling something. He was making weird hand signals, sticking his thumbs in his ears and wiggling his fingers. Then, in exasperation, he just pointed to the lake. I looked across and got his message straight away. "Moose," I yelled. "Yes," he shouted in reply, "and it's huge."

He jumped onto his bike and took off as the moose came thundering towards us. With one eye on the advancing moose, I secured the tripod to my bike rack and then started pedalling to catch my friend. Thanks to a bit of healthy fear, I pedalled like I'd never done before. My legs were going like pistons and I didn't look back again until I reached the top of the hill. Fortunately for us, the moose stopped halfway up the hill. People told us later that moose can be more dangerous than grizzly bears and proceeded to relate a string of horrific moose tales.

To me, life is a lot like that. We can spend an enormous amount of time worrying about the bears that may come and trying to anticipate every twist of fate. But often in the end, it's not the bear that comes at all. It's a giant moose.

What are you afraid of? We all have fears.

Usually, we're more afraid of letting other people know we've got them than we are of the fears themselves. Because often when you say them out loud, they sound so silly. But fears they are, and they are very real, and they can terrorise us.

We are afraid of other people. We can't get inside their minds, and we do not know what they're thinking about us. They make us feel ill at ease or tongue-tied or else they may say things or make us say things of which we repent a moment later.

We are afraid of ourselves. Sometimes we don't seem to know the inside of our minds, let alone anyone else's. What are we? Who are we? How can we become integrated personalities? How can all the warring, jangling, bits inside us ever come to a unity?

We're afraid of the past. The legacy of things done that cannot be undone. Afraid of the present. The moment in which we've got to live. Afraid of the future. What will become of us? Will we stay healthy, or will we fall foul of some disease? Physical disease or mental disorder.

We're afraid of strange things. Of spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Of things we wouldn't even tell our best friend. Afraid of the dark or of heights or of drownings or of empty spaces or of crowded rooms or being locked behind doors: secret, irrational fears which can make our life a quiet terror.

Now, not that I, as a preacher, would ever get political from the pulpit. However, I must admit to a reasonable degree of fear arising within me as I watch Trump and Harris on TV each evening.

And are we afraid of God? What is that power beyond the whole of the universe? Is it a hostile power? Is it a placatable power? Have we fallen foul of it? Is there anything we can do about it? Is death the prelude to a blank, unending, despairing, loneliness? Or is it the prelude

to the laughter of a maniac echoing down the empty corridors of eternity? Or is it the gateway to a confrontation with an unattained deity that is too awful to contemplate?

Now you say, "I know just what Rob's going to say next. He's going to tell us that if we're Christians, if we know Jesus and trust God, all our fears will be gone, and we shall be able to live happily ever after." May God forgive me if I'm ever like the false prophets denounced by Jeremiah who cry "peace" when there is no peace and try to heal the hurt of the Lord's people lightly.

These fears are real. They are genuine terrors. They will not be healed with a verbal formula. Ultimately, yes, they will disappear at the word of God, like the sickness of the nobleman's son at Capernaum which fled at the word of Jesus. But they will not disappear without a fight. And Paul knew that.

It was a mortal fight in which a man needed the whole armour of God to stand against the wiles of the devil. This is not a fight against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places, needing the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. And in this fight against our fears, a fight armed with all the strength which God supplies, there will be nights of terror.

Jacob knew them; Jacob resting with his nocturnal visitor until his hip was put out and he received God's blessing. Moses, in his fear of facing Pharaoh to demand the Israelite slaves be released. Elijah's fear after his defeat of the Baal prophets at Mount Carmel and Jezebel seeking to kill him in revenge.

I'm sure Jesus himself in his humanity would have known fear in the garden of Gethsemane before the pain of his crucifixion. The disciples themselves were so full of fear after the crucifixion of Jesus that they ran away and hid in a locked room. Our fears do not go easily. Jacob's didn't, Paul's didn't. We may find that they last, on and off, all our lives, but God can give us the strength to bear them and God may, of his mercy, deliver us from them.

One of the fears of religiously minded people who go to church and take their religion seriously is the fear of damnation: the fear of unrepentant sin, maybe of unrepentable sin. God wants no person to live in that fear and he has promised categorically that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive all our sins and to cleanse us.

That is a true promise. Some people can realise the truth of it by themselves. Others find that they have to tell their sins to a priest or minister as God's representative, to ask him to help them find their way through their fears to a trust in God and to hear him declare God's forgiveness to them. Any minister or priest can do this for a penitent, and he'll never be embarrassed to be asked nor embarrassed by what he hears.

But one way or the other, whether in the quiet of your own prayer place or in the church, God's forgiveness to penitent sinners must be declared so that they may have his peace all the days of their lives.

As we think of all our fears we know, even perhaps while we're in the grip of them, that they will pass, and that God is stronger than the most powerful of them. In his great might, with all his power endued, we can tread down all the powers of darkness and win the well-fought day.

The struggle may be hard, it may be long. We may need help in it, perhaps the help of a Christian friend, the help of a minister, even perhaps, for some people, the help of a psychologist. But the final issue is not in doubt. God is greater than our fears and he knows everything. He will never, never let us go.