

Trinity 25, 1 Samuel 10: 17-24, Matthew 8: 23-34

A Sermon Preached at King's College, Cambridge on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2018

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*And Jesus saith unto them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith? Then he arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm.*

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

What are you afraid of? We all have our fears. But sometimes our fears get out of control and make shipwrecks of our hearts, and souls and minds.

Our readings this morning are riddled with fear. Saul is so fearful of being made King he hides among the luggage. Almost literally burying his head in the sand; soothing his fear with the balm of ignorance and indifference, shirking responsibility for as long as he can. And those poor disciples are frantic with fear as they feel they are about to capsize and be pulled into the sea. They are paralysed with fear, they just don't know what to do. They are desperate, consumed by fear even though the Lord of heaven and earth is sat right beside them in the boat. The figure of the Gerasene Demoniac provokes fear in the community and he is left to wander among the tombstones, he cannot scare the dead. Upon his healing, rather than rejoicing, the crowds are fearful of Jesus and his power and demand that he leaves the town. The one who brings liberation and deliverance is feared by those who wish to keep the status quo and those who are imprisoned by their fears.

And what of us? What are we afraid of? What of our world today, are we any less fearful? Are we any less likely to hide away among the luggage of life, are we any less likely to use fear as weapon to distance those who are different? Are we any less likely to be overwhelmed with fear on the choppy seas of our earthly pilgrimage, not noticing that Christ is already with us in the boat?

Read the news, look around, what do you see? Beneath the gloss and glamour, underlying our current political discourse, lurking in the corner of our hearts eating away at our confidence, is fear- fear of the other, fear of change, fear of ourselves, fear of difference, fear of shame, fear of the future: all these fears can cause wars and rumours of wars, all these fears can diminish our humanity and obliterate our dreams. Commentators say that we are living in a culture of fear- and that culture of fear drives radicalism, and racism, it fuels conflict, discrimination, prejudice, depression, isolation and the breakdown of society.

Why, in a period of relative prosperity and of relative peace, certainly compared to our forebears who faced world wars of unimaginable terror and bloodshed, why are we stirring up fear in ourselves, in our communities? It's all too easy to become incarcerated in our own prisons of fear; we become weak with worry- too afraid to reach out, too scared to open ourselves up to God's will, too fearful to take a risk. How can we break out of this cycle of fear? Is there another way?

Why does Christ keep saying to his disciples again and again, *Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.*

It starts as a whisper, and as Christ approaches, the whisper becomes a shout- Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Why is it, that throughout the scriptures, the theme grows stronger- what is God in Christ trying to tell us? In the bible, the phrase *Do not be afraid*- or an equivalent, is said 365 times, apparently. For every day of the year perhaps? We are reminded that God is with us and there is no need to fear.

In 1933, the theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a sermon on the Gospel reading we have heard today. He too was living in a time of fear. The German Government was collapsing, and in disarray, there was violence on the streets, communities were fragmenting, there was a growing movement towards nationalism, politics was becoming more aggressive and Hitler was about to come to power. Bonhoeffer titled his sermon: *Overcoming Fear.*

In all of the disarray he was experiencing, Bonhoeffer reminded his congregation that Christ was in the boat with them, and Christ alone made fear shrink back and cower away. With Christ for us, who can possibly be against us?

*And Jesus saith unto them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?*

At the end of his sermon, Bonhoeffer wrote:

*'What sort of person is this on whom fear has no effect, who overcomes the fear in human life and takes away its power? By asking this question, we are already on our knees before him, praying to him, pointing to him, the wonder worker, and saying, This is God! Amen.'*

Marilyn Robinson, in an essay of 2015 writes *'Fear is not a Christian habit of mind'*

Why is that so? As Christ calmed the storms, as Christ cast out the demons into the sea, as Christ overcame our greatest fear by trampling down death by death itself, we know Christ is the one in whom we can overcome our fears. The perfect love of God in Christ, casts out fear. The risen Christ comes to meet us, scattering fear and gloom, Christ is our Lord and our God, in all, and through all and over all, and with all, and all we have to do is believe.

In him, fear and all of its baggage is nailed to a cross. Christ is the port in the storm, the light in the darkness, the joy of every sorrowful heart, the life that will never, never die; the song that emerges from a stone cold tomb.

If we have even but a little faith, we can overcome our fears and as Christian's, if we can overcome our fears, perhaps we can also help the world overcome its fears as well.