

What makes you afraid?

The news and social media are full of fear: Fear of the Coronavirus; fear of second wave; fear of our economy collapsing and lack of jobs (two of our children are committed to careers in the Arts and they see all their opportunities of future employment disappearing). The Black Lives Matter campaign has given voice to the constant fear of discrimination that many people of colour experience almost daily. All these have come to the fore, they do so on the back of other fears that were already weighing heavily for many: of Brexit, excessive immigration, climate change and the destruction of the planet; lack of opportunity for young people, damaging trade deals etc.

So, how do we deal with fear?

Some fears are disproportionate and can be reduced by understanding. Anti Vacc conspiracy theory could create a fear of vaccines which can be resolved by information about the safety of the vaccine. I carry a fear of the dentist from poor treatment as a child – but I have also experienced how painful dental problems can be. Weighing up the positives of visiting the dentist and my more recent positive experiences enables me to acknowledge my fear but overcome it. Some fears of Covid can be dealt with by understanding the level of risk – both the small chance of becoming serious ill if catching the illness and confidence in the safety of the place where we are going to – for instance, if you want to pray in church, knowing that the church has been thoroughly cleaned between sessions and there is clear guidance to ensure we keep the 2 metre distance.

Other fears are genuine but context can affect how greatly we are affected by them. I was reading a few days ago about the discrimination a black police officer experienced from fellow officers. He lived with real daily fear about what he would experience but, horrible as this was, his belief in the good he could accomplish motivated him to continue despite the fear.

In our Gospel reading the word “afraid” crops up 5 times as Jesus addressed the fears that could paralyse Christians and stop them getting fully committed to mission. His aim isn’t to dismiss these fears – but to give us confidence in who we are as his followers; involved in his mission and bringing about objectives which will last forever

Last week we looked at the verses preceding these, which reflected on the power of the Spirit enabling Christians to be effective in mission. They were verses filled with hope and optimism but today’s passage is harder to take as Jesus reminds us that if he faced opposition so too will we. Successful mission is not about numbers of converts or power ministry – it is presenting people with the truth of the Kingdom and allowing them to respond. Some will accept the good news gladly, but others will reject it – and it is that rejection side which today’s passage deals with.

The things that his followers might be afraid of (In order that they appear, not in order of severity) are:

Misunderstood – We know that we are proclaiming truth and love but it will be portrayed by some as extreme evil

Death – In some places in the world today Christians are being killed in large numbers

Rejection – Even families will be divided as some accept the message of Jesus and others reject it.

What Jesus doesn't say is "don't worry, these things won't happen!" what he is saying is that these things will happen but the rewards of living for Jesus makes them worth it. When teachers and nurses get asked why they are willing to work so hard for so little money, the answer usually lies in the reward of seeing young lives changed and improved.

When we look to the positive then we find courage for the suffering

There is a cost to being part of Jesus's army of transformation – but the rewards in seeing the world changed for God make it all worthwhile. However we cannot deny the reality of fear that suffering produces and Jesus addresses that fear with three reasons:

- a. In the final judgement the truth will be exposed. We should not be surprised that the media frequently distort the truth of the church and emphasise our failings but not our contribution to the world – after all that is what they did with Jesus. God knows what is true and one day the truth will be revealed.
- b. The most that any opponent can do to silence the truth is to kill the witness. Yet, contrary to appearance, physical death does not destroy one's existence nor snatch one out of the Father's hand (John 10:29). Because Jesus died and rose again, disciples do not need to fear death. Instead, God is the only one to be feared, that is, to be held in awe and reverence because he alone is the judge "who is able to save and destroy" For you and me the chances of needing to put this to the test are minimal but round the world Christians are being murdered for their faith in ever increasing numbers.
- c. We do not have answers to why evil and lies are often victorious over truth and justice, but we do know that God is in ultimate control and that his providence governs not only the life of the sparrow but also, and especially, the lives of his servants. God knows us intimately in ways that even the closest of our fellow human beings do not, for he has even numbered the hairs of our head

And so the passage closes with a reminder that opting out isn't an option. "39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." The paradox of faith is that clinging on to the things the world values leads ultimately to a valueless life – but sacrificing all to follow Jesus leads to true life in all its fullness.