

Moving Beyond Fear

Exodus 24: 12 – 18

2 Peter 1: 16 - 21

Matthew 17: 1 – 9

Purpose: To confront people with the unsettling nature of an encounter with the fullness of Christ, but hold out the promise of the one who lifts us up and moves us forward.

“Fear is no basis for a relationship with anyone let alone with God.” I think that many of you will have heard me say that before. What’s more I am equally sure that you will hear me say again and again and again. That’s what I believe. The writer of the first epistle of John says so simply and eloquently. “God is love and those who live in love live in God.”

Peace-making is the evangelical strategy of Jesus.

Fear is no basis for a relationship with God.

I would like to think that those are the familiar themes of my preaching. I believe them to be core principles of our missionary strategy.

So what’s this we have in today’s gospel?

Jesus who is God’s loving gift to the world takes his colleagues Peter, James and John with him to the mountain top where a great transformation takes place. Jesus is

transfigured before them. His face shines like the sun. His clothes become a shimmering white. He is seen talking with those great leaders from the tradition of Israel, Moses and Elijah. Then from the cloud the heavenly voice speaks. "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him."

And where are the disciples; these colleagues of Jesus who are travelling with him on his missionary journey? They have fallen flat to the ground. They are quaking and quivering, shuddering and shivering. Why? Because they are frightened!

And who would we blame them?

Fear is a normal part of life. Fear is what happens in when you live alongside tsunami affected nuclear reactors in Fukushima, Japan living with the constant anxiety of that uncertainty or living with the tension of civil unrest in the Ukraine. Fear is wondering what's happened to your home as you try to rest in a bushfire shelter as flames rage close by. Fear is living in solitary confinement in an Egyptian jail after being arrested for reporting the news according to the highest standards of a journalist's professional ethics.

But, that's not the fear that has overcome this select band of disciples. This is the fear of those who in following Jesus have suddenly been confronted with the unexpected. This is

the fear of those who in keeping with their religious and cultural tradition prefer standing a step or two apart from the fullness of the glory of God. For Peter, James and John, this fear involves the sudden discovery that a relationship with Jesus might move them outside the normal boundaries of their religious loyalty into something absolutely extraordinary because their leader is not just fit to keep company with the likes of Moses and Elijah, but because their leader is the one of whom the heavenly voice speaks and command them: "Listen to him."

When you think about, fear is not an altogether unfamiliar response among those who are confronted with the awesome reality of Jesus. The disciples are fishing failures. With Jesus help they pull in a marvellous catch. They feel frightened. Jesus saves their lives in the boat when the wind and the waves threaten. They feel frightened. The women leave the tomb on the morning of his resurrection. Fear invades them. At Nain, when Jesus restores a young man to life and brings hoped to a widowed mother, the crowd of mourners is seized by fear.

It's hard to escape it. Fear may be no basis for a relationship with anyone let alone with God, but it is surely and integral part of the human response when the fullness of God's glory and love becomes real and apparent as Jesus dwells among us.

To be confronted with awesome glory of God in all its fullness is an unsettling thing. To discover a vocation in Christ is an unsettling thing. To take Jesus seriously and to receive the divine challenge – Listen to him – and to allow that challenge to become the focal point of all that we are and all that we do is an unsettling thing.

I wonder if you are familiar with the stories of Eva French, Mildred Cable and Eva's sister Francesca. They were missionaries in China in the early twentieth century. Eva was actually there during the Boxer Rebellion when many Christians lost their lives. Mildred went there soon after.

In 1923 they travelled to Kanchow via the Silk Road evangelizing as they went before returning home for a two year break. I wonder how they felt as they left England after that a two year break to return to the Gobi Desert.

To respond to the awesome glory of God revealed to us in the person and work of Christ can be an unsettling thing. To discover our vocation in Christ can be unsettling thing.

God's call when it comes can scare the living daylights out of us. To be called to preach as some of you who are lay preachers do is a terrifying thing. It is an awesome responsibility to stand where I am standing now and try to say something in which all present might hear God's special word for them.

To publicly share our faith and witness to the life of God in us; by golly that can be scary too! And probably scariest of all when we do it with those with whom we are closest.

How tragic it might have been if Jesus had left Peter and James and John cowering on the ground, flat on their faces unable to face their future. What a tragedy if the comfort of his touch had been missing at that critical moment. How tragic if Jesus not spoken those words as he reached out his hands: “Get up. Don’t be frightened.”

Without those words and that touch, we may never have known that those were Jesus words to us also. Without those words and that touch we may never have risen to the challenges of following the ways of Jesus in this place at this moment. Without that touch and those words, the vocation and purpose that the Spirit of God brings into our lives in Jesus’ name might have been still born. Without that touch and those words we might never rise to the challenge of helping our brothers and our sisters, our friends and our neighbours discover that “God is love and those who live in love live in God.” If the story had ended right there, with our apostolic forerunners, flat out in fear, cowering on the ground, we might never have discovered that fear is no basis for a relationship with God. We might never have discovered our vocation as reconciling, peace-makers given expression

here and now, in our place and time, to the evangelical strategy of Jesus.

But that word is spoken, not just to Peter, James and John. It is spoken to us – we who are children of the resurrection on a journey with Jesus just as surely as those three men who travel with him down from the top of the mountain.

It is a challenging, unsettling thing to risk living the way of Jesus. To feel fear and apprehension is a natural thing when the awesome reality of God in Christ confronts us and challenges us to put aside the things of the past move to new places. Tradition lives on with Moses and Elijah on the mountain, but with Jesus it takes a new turn and with him we travel in a different direction.

That's God's message to God's people everywhere and to you today. We cannot live in the past. We are called to a new future in Christ. It is a fearful thing to step out in faith having discovered the awesome wonder of the full glory of Jesus. But in the face of that fear, Jesus speaks to us: "There's no need to be afraid. Get up." And so we move forward, beyond our fear, on a journey with Jesus in an entirely new direction.

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