

Fear

21 6 09

Lord, you have taught us
that all our doings without love are nothing worth;
send your Holy Spirit
and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love,
the true bond of peace and all virtues.

My text may be found in today's gospel from Mark, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' (4 v 40)

One thing we share; one thing we have in common, all of us at some time or other have felt afraid. Fear, our ability to experience fear, is one of the distinguishing characteristics of what it is to be human. The capacity to feel frightened is hard-wired into our consciousness as an in-built survival mechanism. It is something we share with other living creatures. Since Christmas, I have been feeding the birds on my balcony with fat balls and bread crumbs. If a sparrow or tit or chaffinch catch sight of me moving beyond the French window or if a magpie approaches, they take flight. Being afraid is a natural response to a perceived danger. Aristotle's considered that being overwhelmed by fear was 'cowardice' whilst a total ignorance of fear was 'fool-hardiness'; for Aristotle, true virtue was to be found in the middle way - 'courage' - which was the proper action in the light of the perceived threat or danger.

Today, the disciples are afraid? Can you blame them?

They are caught up in a storm on the lake. It's the middle of the night. They are in a boat crossing over from one side of the Sea of Galilee to the other when a sudden squall, a phenomenon peculiar to the geography of the area, springs up and the combined force of wind and wave threatens to engulf them. Some of them like Peter, Andrew, James and John are experienced fishermen; others like Matthew weren't, but everyone is terrified. In their fear and distress, they wake Jesus up. 'Teacher do you not care that we are perishing?' Jesus has been asleep at the back of the boat. Nothing surprising here – it is after all the middle of the night; Jesus has had a long and exhausting day teaching the crowds and performing miracles. He will probably be up early in the morning around day-break to pray. He is a carpenter and he knows he's in safe hands so why shouldn't he be asleep? Mark includes a nice touch in his account of the miracle – the cushion on which Jesus has laid his head: it's much easier to fall asleep if your head is being comfortably supported. But Jesus has been woken up and he stands up and rebukes the wind and commands the sea to be still. 'Then the wind ceased and there was a dead calm.' It's just like a class of naughty children misbehaving while their teacher is out of the room only to subside on his return. Thus the riot of wind and wave is quelled.

So everything is okay again and 'they all lived happily ever after'. Not quite; this isn't a fairy story but an account of one of Jesus' more dramatic miracles. Any miracle that Jesus performed had a reason and purpose: they are not casual acts. This miracle of power over the natural world, this miracle of control of the badly

behaved spirit of the storm, is a clear demonstration that Jesus is the Son of God. As such, it is a stunning visual aid and indeed the disciples are stunned. Mark concludes this passage with this sentence: 'And they were filled with a great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?' The word 'awe' contains the idea not only of amazement and wonder but also a sense of fear, a fear born of the overwhelming respect that being in the presence of someone holy, someone wholly different, can bring. The disciples' fear of being drowned has been replaced by the fear of being in the presence of God.

So today we can see in the miracle of stilling the storm that fear is natural. We should recognise fear for what it is: a warning of imminent danger. And our response: faith in Christ who is the Lord of Creation. It's not that we shouldn't be afraid but that our fear should not prevent us from acting or stop us in our tracks like a rabbit frozen in the beams of a headlight. By mastering our fear, we can avoid the extremes of cowardice on the one hand and foolhardiness on the other. Our faith in Christ should give us the courage and confidence to act appropriately.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist
St Bartholomew's Dinard
21st June, 2009*

H: Sermon 20: Fear

