

## Fear not

A sermon preached by Revd Dr Mark Butchers at St Peter's Wolvercote on 11<sup>th</sup> August 2013

### **Luke 12.32-40**

*Jesus said to his disciples, <sup>32</sup>'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. <sup>33</sup>Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. <sup>34</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. <sup>35</sup>Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; <sup>36</sup>be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. <sup>37</sup>Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. <sup>38</sup>If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. <sup>39</sup>But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. <sup>40</sup>You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'*

Jesus said to his disciples "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." **μη φοβου** (pronounced 'mare foboo'). Be not afraid. Fear not. These are Gospel words - Good news from God - fear not. If you think back to the opening chapters of Genesis, remember Adam's words to God after he and Eve had eaten the fruit - "I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid ..." He says this to the God who had created him and walked and talked with him, who even then was searching him out. "I was afraid". And ever since God has been saying to the human race, particularly through Jesus: "Fear not, little flock ..."

Perhaps it is an irresistible part of being human that we will experience anxiety, worry, fear of different sorts at different times.

- That might be low level anxiety about this or that. I've just been in Portugal. I find that travelling anywhere is always an anxious experience. Will the taxi turn up on time to take you to the Park and Ride? Will the coach arrive and will there be space on it, despite the fact that you have reserved seats the week before? Will it get you to the airport on time? Will they have remembered your details at check in? Will your luggage be under the weight limit, even though you carefully checked it on the bathroom scales? Will your cabin luggage be small enough? Will your passport which you've already checked several times, have somehow leapt out of your bag between home and passport control and gone awol? Will the flight be on time? Will you be reunited with your luggage at the other end? Will the hire car be there (it wasn't)? Will your drive to the hotel be OK? And will your hotel have remembered your booking from several months before? .....It's always a relief to get to Day 2!
- More seriously, we experience anxiety at times about relationships, family, work, or about health - be that our own or other people's.
- Occasionally we get that gut-wrenching fear when something threatens our physical safety.
- And some people live with deep debilitating fear and anxiety which can at times paralyze an active life, and requires counseling or medication.

All of us, at some time or another, will have experienced something on the spectrum from worry to fear.

And to all of this, comes the Good News from God in Christ – the words: “Fear not...” It is in fact a running refrain through the Gospels. In Matthew and Luke, there are nine uses of the phrase **μη φοβου** or the plural **μη φοβεισθε**.

In the birth stories in Luke, Zechariah and Mary and the shepherds are all told by angels “Fear not”. When Jesus is calling his disciples, he tells Simon Peter not to be afraid about their future calling. When he appears to them in surprising ways – walking on the water and on the mount of Transfiguration - again we hear “Fear not”. And to Jairus grieving for his daughter, and to the women at the tomb, he also says “Fear not”. It is a steady constant Gospel message addressed to our irresistible, understandable human worries and fears.

There are, I think, three particular concerns which these divine words address.

First and most fundamentally, our fear of death. When Jesus is told that Jairus’ daughter has died he says: “Do not fear, only believe; and she will be saved”(Luke 8:50; and when he gets to the home, he calls her out. We cannot *know* what will happen beyond death. It is beyond proof. Yet there is evidence, there are grounds for belief in Jesus’s resurrection within time and space 2000 years ago. And it is faith in that which provides the basis for Christian hope that death will not have the last word; that God will call us out into new life with him. We can’t *prove* that. We can’t *prove* that God’s “Fear not” in relation to death is more than mere words. But we can have faith based on sound evidence that it is so. Jesus’ resurrection grounds our hope and the Holy Spirit works constantly within us to build that hope and drive out fear. “Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting”!

Second, there is our fear of the unknown, our fear of the future, which is not unrelated to our fear of death. Often this comes upon us suddenly through some major change in our life or that of our loved ones. We feel completely at sea, anxious, fearful, not quite knowing where to turn.

Sometimes it comes upon us because we decide to set out on a new course, perhaps responding to God’s calling or guiding – like Abraham walking by faith into a new land, no doubt both trusting and fearful in equal measure. God’s “fear not” then comes as reassurance that he is with us: “I am your shield” he says to Abraham. Or as Jesus says to the disciples at the end of Matthew’s Gospel: “remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age”. Again this is nothing we can prove. We can only sense God’s arm around us, there to guide and support as necessary, often through other people:

Brother, sister, let me serve you,  
let me be as Christ to you;

.....

I will hold the Christ-light for you  
in the night-time of your fear.

Our hope, trust and faith as Christians is that we cannot ever walk alone into unknown futures, because God is beside us and ahead of us.

Thirdly and finally, there is our fear of not being loved or accepted by God. I have done *x*, *y* or *z* which surely makes it impossible for God to love and accept me. If God thought in those terms, heaven would be very empty, because we've all done *x*, *y* or *z* in our lives. We've all fallen short in one way or another. But the whole point of the Good News of Jesus is that we don't have to reach a percentage pass mark to be loved and accepted. If we did, then our fears would be justified. But we don't. All we need do is accept God's forgiveness freely given: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom".

The image, later in the Gospel, of the master getting his slaves to sit down at table and *him* serving *them*, reminded me of George Herbert's poem "Love bade me welcome" – and what more eloquent way of expressing our hope that we are loved and accepted by God than that poem by George Herbert?

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,  
Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
If I lack'd anything.

"A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here";  
Love said, "You shall be he."  
"I, the unkind, the ungrateful? Ah, my dear,  
I cannot look on thee."  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
"Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve."  
"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"  
"My dear, then I will serve."  
"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."  
So I did sit and eat.

*George Herbert 1593-1633*

Worry, anxiety, fear, it's all part of being human. If we didn't experience them, we'd be God. But God knows that and addresses that by coming to us in Jesus and giving us in the resurrection a firm ground for hope, which drives out fear – or at least keeps it within bounds. We can, I believe, trust in new life beyond death, in God's constant presence with us no matter what the future holds, and in his constant love for us no matter what we have done. **μη φοβου**. Do not be afraid. Fear not. We are loved by a God who will never let us go, in this life or the next. Amen.