

Sunday 2nd March 2014

St Barnabas, E17.

Theme: On fear... fobias, credit unions, Farage, War, Homophobia and LOVE

'While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.'

Peter, James and John were overcome with fear. Wouldn't you be? I know I would! Imagine yourself in their position. You go for a hike up the mountain, a nice, refreshing break from the hustle and bustle of life. How pleasant for them to get away from those crowds which were constantly pressing-in on Jesus. How great to get away from those Chief Priests always out to trick him. It must have been fantastic to get away from the constant fear associated with living under cruel Roman occupation. The four of them were alone, away from pressure, away from fear ...a lovely break up on the mountain top! And then, something happens! Suddenly, Jesus is transfigured, changed before their eyes. His clothes become dazzling white; his face shines like the sun; next to him appear the figures of Moses and Elijah, long-dead prophets from the distant past; a cloud overshadows them; and then the Voice of God speaks from the cloud. Peter, James and John fall to the ground and they are terrified, they are overcome with fear!

Let me ask a question which I know some of you have heard me ask before, "What do you fear?" What makes you afraid?" Father Lionel's excellent sermon last week helped us think about what causes to worry, but today's

question is slightly different, “What do you fear?” or “What makes you afraid?” Of course, we may fear the things that worry us, but I suggest fear goes deeper than worry. To be anxious is one thing, to be afraid is more serious, more prone I suggest to thoughts and actions that are not entirely rational.

Take a fear of spiders, for example. Who here is or ever has been afraid of spiders? OK, some spiders bite, some are deadly, so maybe the fear of spiders has a rational basis. But I know I have been afraid of tiny spiders which have absolutely no chance of causing me harm. And yet I have screamed on seeing spiders and have seen others reduced to tears or induced to panic-attack! The fear is somehow irrational, but it goes deep, and overcoming that fear, which I have now done, takes a bit of inner work and a bit of outer courage. They call the specific fear of spiders arachnophobia...and it is one of many kinds of phobia that can have a paralysing effect of people’s lives. There are so many of these phobias and there are specialist organisations and self-help groups that help people to overcome phobias. Here are just some phobias from phobialist.com:

Ablutophobia- Fear of washing or bathing.

Acarophobia- Fear of itching...

Acerophobia- Fear of sourness.

Achluophobia- Fear of darkness.

Acousticophobia- Fear of noise.

Acrophobia- Fear of heights.

Aerophobia- Fear of drafts, air swallowing, or airbourne noxious substances.

Aeroacrophobia- Fear of open high places.

Aeronausiphobia- Fear of vomiting secondary to airsickness.

Agateophobia- Fear of insanity.

Agliophobia- Fear of pain.

Agoraphobia- Fear of open spaces or of being in crowded, public places like markets. Fear of leaving a safe place.

Agraphobia- Fear of sexual abuse.

Agrizoophobia- Fear of wild animals.

Agyrophobia- Fear of streets or crossing the street.

Aichmophobia- Fear of needles or pointed objects.

Ailurophobia- Fear of cats.

Albuminurophobia- Fear of kidney disease.

Alektorophobia- Fear of chickens.

Algophobia- Fear of pain.

Alliumphobia- Fear of garlic.

Allodoxaphobia- Fear of opinions.

The list literally goes on and on and on....and I do not want to trivialise these phobias, but acknowledge that these fears are real, that they can eat away at people's live, but also acknowledge that, sometimes with help, they can be overcome.

And I've shared all this as a means of giving some background to encourage us to thing about some other kinds of fear and how they might be overcome as well.

Last week, I joined our local Credit Union...this was in the response to the challenge put to us by our Archbishop, Justin Welby, to support Credit Unions. So I went up to the bottom of Church Hill there and I signed-up. I realised if I transfer my debts to the Credit Union that I will pay back on them at a lower rate of interest than on my bank account and that I will be supporting an ethical form of banking. But it took me a while to get to the front of the queue because there were others there waiting to process loans from the Credit Union and I could not help but over-hear others in the queue talk

about their financial desperation. I got a small glimpse into some very real fears among the people there about the pressures on their lives ... and I thought thank God the Credit Union is there to provide calm reassurance and practical help. So many in our community, including in this congregation, are in the grip of fear over money, not least when in debt to loan sharks or the legal loan companies like Wonga. The Credit Union offers a way out of this fear and I hope many of us might join it as a means of overcoming our own fears about money and helping others to do the same.

And then we are very aware of another kind of fear in our country, not least in our media, the fear of foreigners: xenophobia. Last week Nigel Farage of UKIP launched his party manifesto for the euro-elections and predictably it includes a tough stance on immigration. But also, it seems to me, there is a deeper fear about multi-cultural communities. He described parts of England as “unrecognisable”, presumably referring to places like Walthamstow. And one has to ask, ‘what drives such fear?’, ‘why is Farage so threatened, so afraid by what he sees in communities like ours?’ I would love to invite him here to show him what a beautiful community we are. I wish he’d come along to enjoy our *Love Migrants Party*, which is not only featured in our wonderful parish magazine but also got a mention in this week’s Church Times! Perhaps we could help him to see things differently, but I guess it will take a fair bit of work from him and us to help him overcome what seem to be deep-seated fears of people from other countries. His kind of politics so often fuels racism, which is why I am glad Ulrike is here today to promote the anti-racism rally on 22nd March, and which I hope many of us will attend.

Another fear we are very aware of is the fear generated by war. We are so aware of the tensions in Ukraine and I noticed the words of a Bishop there saying the political tensions there will not end until there is a spiritual re-awakening in the country. I was also struck by this Christian Aid advert “Fear Less” talking about their work in healing the scars of war.

And a the final fear I have been very aware of this week, is the fear of gay people: homophobia - not least in relation to what is happening in Uganda and Nigeria at present. There both parliaments have recently passed legislation criminalising gay activity. In Uganda so-called “aggravated homosexuality” can lead to life imprisonment. This was, at least, short of the proposed death penalty for homosexuality, but a Ugandan newspaper has published a list of “200 homos” sparking a witch hunt. And in both Nigeria and Uganda there are already so many stories of gay people being beaten, even beaten to death for being gay. What is going on? What fear drives such hatred? And how can it be overcome?

Here in the UK, the Church of England House of Bishops have issued guidelines against clergy or ordinands engaging in same-sex marriage when that becomes legal in this country later this year. And it is hard for those supportive of gay people and LGBT people themselves not to receive these guidelines and much of the Church’s official position on human sexuality as homophobic, based on a fear of gay people. This will be an issue of much debate for me and others on the General Synod over the coming years. A recent report, the Pilling Report, has been published to help us discuss these matters and it is going to be hard work in a context where there is such fundamental disagreement and fear on all sides. I don’t mind admitting that I am pretty scared of

some of those who speak out so aggressively against gay sexuality in the General Synod, but these are people with whom I will have to engage in facilitated discussion and I will need to remind myself of my desire for such discussions to take place in a spirit of mutual love.

Which brings me to my closing remarks: how can we overcome fear of others, fear of those who seem against us, and their fear of us when they feel we are against them? The answer is known to us through scripture and in one sense therefore the answer is easy. We find it in 1 John Chapter Four when we read, ...¹⁷ By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. ¹⁹We love, because He first loved us.' It is love that overcomes fear! And we seek to love others because we know from our experience that love is transformative. We seek to love others because we know how God's love transforms us. We seek to overcome fear of others by love, because we know that God overcomes our fears by his love for us.

Let us return to Peter, James and John. They are terrified, they fall to the ground, they are overcome with fear. And what does Jesus do? He comes to them, he touches them, he shows them his love and compassion for them, then he says to them, "Get up and do not be afraid". And when they look up, the passage tells us, they see no one except Jesus. We might say, all they see is Jesus, as if all fear can be overcome with Jesus' love for them firmly in their gaze. It is not necessarily as easy as it sounds, but the answer to our fears and overcoming fear in others is right there before us: LOVE! It may seem romantic, but the power of love works. I saw it at work in the love of those Credit Union staff helping to restore calm to people full of fear; I saw it at our Love Migrants

party where people of many cultures celebrated together with no fear at all; I see it in the work of those who work to heal the fears caused by war; I see it at House of Rainbow fellowship which includes people who've fled Nigeria and Uganda in fear because they are gay, and who are shown the welcome, love and acceptance, not only of others but, most importantly of Jesus. Jesus, as the disciples knew and as we know, has the power to cast out fear. If we keep our eyes firmly on Jesus so that we can see his loving gaze looking firmly on us, we have a strategy for addressing our own fears and the fobias of others, confident that "perfect love casts out fear".

Steven Saxby, March 2014.