

**Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2012**  
**St Saviour's, E17 and St Michael's, E17.**  
**Reading: Luke 24: 36b-48**  
**Theme: Fear.**

**'Why are you frightened?'**

**It seems like a strange question for Jesus to ask his disciples – Why are you frightened? After all they have been through, the years spent with him, seeing him do amazing things, expecting him to do even greater things, and then watching him be arrested, tortured and put to death, all their hopes dashed, as they fled in fear, abandoning him, even denying him in his time of need. Why are you frightened? They had been terrified by all that had happened and now, the one they knew had hung and died on the cross appears among them and asks, “Why are you frightened?” Wouldn't you be? I know I would!**

**Why are you frightened? Or to put it another way, what makes you afraid? I once put that question to a group of people, asking for their immediate responses. One replied "everything", another, straight afterwards, said "nothing". A child told me he was afraid of dinosaurs. Let me ask you now? What makes you afraid? ... As we can see responses to fear are very varied, fear takes many forms, different people experience different kinds of fear.**

**There's a kind of fear associated with fears of mice, of spiders, of heights, of lightening, of the dark, and so on. Most of us, I suspect, make light of such fears. I have a fear of moths. An event in my teenage years has left me with it and, as long as I'm not left alone in a room with a moth, I'm fine. To some such fears are irrational. To some they are no more than learnt responses to**

particular stimuli. Yet others see these fears as quite logical: mice, or at least rats, carry deadly diseases; spiders, or at least some spiders, or poisonous; people, sometimes, fall from heights; lightning, sometimes, strikes; and we all know what moths, or at least some moths, are capable, sometimes, of doing in the dark!

It's easy to joke about fears of moths or spiders, but for some, even these fears are quite serious. Indeed, there are some counselling services specifically concerned with trying to help people who have serious fears of this kind.

Whatever kind of fear we experience, our fears - to us at least - are frightening. However small or large they may be, our fears demand that we take them seriously.

We may fear those things which we suspect will change our lives for the worse; losing a job, not having enough money, humiliation, defeat, losing a loved one. We may fear the unknown, the insecurity of not knowing what will come next. Sometimes fears of the unknown turns nasty. Perhaps we've seen people begin to hate those they fear and then to discriminate, to pre-judge. Sometimes we may even fear ourselves, our own capabilities. Should we take the next step or stay comfortable right where we are? Yes sometimes fear is indistinguishable from cowardice, the fear to stand up for ourselves or others, the fear to break bad habits, the fear of getting involved in case we get hurt. Ask yourself, what, deep down, do you fear?

Many in our communities face very real fears indeed. Those who live with bullies at work or school, those who live with violence at home, those who fear immigration authorities, those who fear torture, even death if sent

**back to their countries. And think of Christians in some parts of the world and the torture they endure for their faith. We may sometimes fear what people will make of our faith, whether they will mock and humiliate us – but such fear is a far cry from the kind of fears many Christians around the world have to bear. “Why are you frightened?”**

**Why are you frightened? It was obvious to Jesus why his disciples were frightened, they couldn’t believe what they were seeing. Was it a ghost? So he says to them, “touch me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” Then they are overjoyed – they cannot believe it, this is too good to be true. So, we read that, “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering”, Jesus asks another question. Now here is one of my favourite questions of all time, “Have you anything to eat here?” And there is something very comforting in that question. Jesus calms the fears of his disciples by meeting them in the ordinary. He joins in the BBQ, eats some of their broiled fish and sits down with them to talk about the scriptures.**

**We can imagine that they looked back on that experience later in their ministries, when they had to face all kinds of difficulties, humiliation - for some prison, for some torture – that they looked back on that question and were comforted that just as Jesus was with them in that moment of terror, so he was with them in a different way as they faced all kinds of trials and hardships for his sake.**

**We can assume too that they remembered another incident. Jesus had gone off to pray and instructed the disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee without him. They were out in the middle of that huge inland sea when**

again the wind picked up, perhaps they were already afraid for the lives when they saw a figure, walking on the water, "It's a ghost", they cried, only to discover it was, in fact, Jesus. "Do not be afraid", he said, but no doubt they were petrified then also.

"Do not be afraid." What are we to make of Jesus' words to Peter as the disciple stepped out on the water? At first he was fine, Peter focused on Jesus and found he too was walking in the water. But then he was distracted, he felt the wind, he looked at the waves and he began to sink. Peter stretched out his hand and Jesus rescued him. "Why did you doubt?" Jesus asked, putting a similar question to Peter as the one he'd asked all his disciples, "Why are you frightened and why do doubts arise in your hearts?"

Why are you frightened? Let me conclude by leaving you with this image: Perhaps we can imagine ourselves in Peter's situation. Perhaps the wind and the waves stand for our fears. We can't ignore them. But perhaps we can focus our attention elsewhere. Perhaps we too can look to Jesus for that confidence to rise above our fears. Sometimes we'll fail. Sometimes, paralysed by our fears, we too will sink beneath the waves, jostled by the wind. But sometimes, with the vision of Jesus before us, with his loving arms to rescue us, perhaps we too will be able to overcome our fears, to work for a different outcome than that which terrifies us, to sing with the psalmist: The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear; the Lord is the strength of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?

Steven Saxby, April 2012.