

The Grace Not to Give in to Fear

15 July, 2018

Reading: Mark 6:14-29

It was wonderful on Thursday afternoon to be able to go into St Peter's Church building. It still has a wonderful prayerful atmosphere and beautiful stained glass in the sanctuary. To be honest I have hardly ever been in there. Since the earthquakes it has become like Chernobyl. You can only go in there for two minutes with the right protective gear. When I was Acting Dean, I got a letter from a person who had broken into the Cathedral in the Square. "Dear Dean," it said, "I got drunk and thought it was a good idea to break into the church. Now that I am sober and sitting in a prison cell I don't think it was such a good idea. Here is \$1000 for its restoration." Maybe as a fundraiser for St Peter's we could get people to break in and then we could fine them. Anyway for fear of another aftershock we needed hard hats. Vicars come and go but good wardens like Jo and Corin are hard to replace.

Often our fears can hold us back, whether it's dangerous buildings or dangerous emotions.

I wonder what fears you have? Most of us, when we are honest with ourselves, have lots of fears. We might fear what others think of us. This can stop us taking risks like public speaking. We might fear that we won't be able to support ourselves. We might be worried about our health or our children's health. Some fear that they can't get a job or pass an exam, others fear loss of dignity in their old age, or ... the list goes on.

Today in our reading from Mark we have a window on the fears of Herod Antipas. Not to be confused with Herod the Great. Herod fears John the baptiser, he fears his wife, he fears the Jewish people and he fears Rome. All this conspires to make him execute John. Reading with modern eyes we are shocked at the brutality of the cutting off of John's head. But for Herod this would have just been another day at the office. Herod is a contradiction of competing fears and we see the terrible outcome.

Often it is only as we begin to acknowledge our fears and ask God to help us with them that real change for the best can happen in our lives.

I love the words in the night prayer. "Let our fears of the darkness of the world and of our own lives rest in you, Lord."

Psychologists tell us that we only have two basic emotions as humans: love and fear, all the rest are just variations on these basic themes. How different Herod's actions would have been if they had come from a place of love not of fear. How different our lives would be if we could trust our fears to the love we see in Jesus Christ.

In my fears I draw great strength from the line that appears in 1 John 4:18 "Perfect love casts out all fear." When I stop and think about the love God has for me then my fears become bearable.

This is really what prayer is. Holding ourselves in God's loving presence. For Jesus, prayer seems to be a matter of *waiting in love, returning to love, trusting that love*. Prayer isn't primarily words; it's an attitude, a stance, a state that precedes the "saying" of any individual prayers. That's why Paul could say, "Pray unceasingly." (1 Thessalonians 5:17). If we think of prayer as requiring words, it is surely impossible to pray unceasingly. But if prayer is an attitude of being in God's love, of letting love cast out of fears, then all of life can become an awareness of God's ever present love.

If ever there was a person who didn't let his fears hold him back it was Sir Francis Drake. Born in 1544, Drake was to become one of the most celebrated sailors of all time and only the second person to circumnavigate the globe. The voyage took no less than three years. It was common held belief among the sailors of his fleet that the world was flat so at any moment they feared sailing off the edge of the world. They also feared dragons and sea monsters and the very real possibility of simply starving to death.

To be sure it was far from plain sailing. Drake had several quarrels with his co-commander who turned mutinous and on arriving in Argentina the crew was greeted by the bleached skeletons of the Spanish crew under Magellan who had been executed by him some fifty years earlier.

One of his ships had such rotten timbers that they had to abandon her altogether.

On entering the Pacific a terrible storm destroyed one of the remaining three ships of the fleet and the other had to return home for repairs.

Drake pushed onward in his lone flagship, even though he himself had been badly injured by hostile natives.

Finally he returned home with only 59 remaining crew but with a rich cargo of spices and captured Spanish treasure to a hero's welcome.

Drake always maintained he overcame his fears by divine help. In fact he made divine help one of his mottos.

He penned this prayer to help us overcome our fears:

*Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.*

*Disturb us, Lord, when
With the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst
For the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life,*

*We have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
Of the new Heaven to dim.*

*Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas
Where storms will show Your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars.
We ask You to push back
The horizons of our hopes;
And to push into the future
In strength, courage, hope, and love.*

Let us pray:

God of perfect love
we bring you our fears;
fears that hold us back, fears that paralyze us.
Help us to know that you love us with a perfect love, a love that casts out all fear.
Help us to so entrust ourselves to you that you transform our fears into love.
This we ask in the strong name of Jesus Christ.
Amen.