

 *St Paul's Anglican Parish of Ipswich*
SUNDAY SERMON

A sermon on facing fear

Delivered by Rev'd Steve McMahon on the 6th October 2019

There is a legend from the Orient about a traveller making his way to a large city. One night he meets two other travellers along the road - Fear and Plague. Plague explains to the traveller that, once they arrived, they are expected to kill 10,000 people in the city. The traveller asks Plague if Plague would do all the killing. "Oh, no. I shall kill only a few hundred. My friend Fear will kill the others."

Fear, whether real or imagined, can discourage us, overwhelm us, strangle us. Fear is widespread in our society, from the personal (fear of failure, fear of embarrassment, fear not being loved, etc.) to the social - (fear that war and disasters will go on forever, fear that society will collapse, fear that global warming will kill us, and so on and on). And in the church too there is fear. The personal fears. The social fears. And the spiritual fears.

There a lot of people who feel

- that they are not able to do anything important
- that they cannot and do not make a difference to anyone,
- that they are unable even to do even a part of what it is that God asks them to do,
- and that the great work that obviously needs to be done will never be done, and that they will let God down, or, worse still, that God will let them down.

Many Christians are in a mess, because they have forgotten what their faith is about, but more importantly, they have forgotten what it is that God can accomplish. Questions such as how can I feed the hungry? How can I clothe the naked? How can I bring peace to those around me? How can I spread the gospel? How can I forgive the people who have hurt me so badly? How can I even experience the joy that is supposed to be part of life with God, let alone help bring it to others? All of these make us feel inadequate and yet we forget that the disciples experienced these same feelings. In our gospel reading today we heard them cry out to Jesus. They felt that what they faced in life, let alone what they faced as ones who wanted to follow Jesus, was too much for them, too much for their small faith to handle and so they cry out "Lord - increase our faith. Help us believe enough so that we can do what it is that you have commanded us to do. Lord, take away our fear."

And what does Jesus do? He doesn't lay his hands upon them and pray and give them more faith as they have asked. Nor does he snap his fingers and grant them a double dose of his Spirit and his Faith. Instead he says to them "if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this tree, 'be uprooted up and planted in the sea', and it would obey you". It's as if he's berating them when they ask for his help.

The issue for them and for us all is not: "how much faith do we have?" but rather: "do we have any faith at all?" It really is dependent upon us to see the opportunities that we have and to make the most of them.

Let me give you an illustration. A shoe company sent one of its sales people to a faraway country to start a business. After a few months he sent back the message: "Coming home, nobody wears shoes here." The same company sent another sales person to the same country in his place. After a few months she wrote the home office this note: "Send more order forms - nobody wears shoes here."

The second salesperson saw the opportunity in her situation - not the difficulty - and more - she believed in her product - and because of that she succeeded where the first salesperson failed. If we believe - even a little - then we are on the right track.

Having observed the distinction between having faith and not having faith - the question becomes for us not one of how much faith we have, but what do we have faith in? Too many of us look to ourselves instead of God. We look at ourselves and we say - I can't do it. I am not strong enough, wise enough, loving enough, giving enough, I don't have the money, the power, or the faith to succeed at what I am doing. And that is completely true - we are not able! We do not have what it takes when it comes to dealing with what is truly important.

But God has it. God is able, and when we take hold of Him and believe in him, even a very little, his power is able to flow through us and he will work through us what is his will to do. We so often do not realize just what we have. We let it lie dormant in us and we go out looking for something else. While all the while God is there and our faith in God is there doing very little.

The good news of Jesus Christ covers all areas of human life, it speaks of forgiveness and peace and eternal life, it addresses the problems of poverty and of war, it provides solutions to despair and answers to human distress. But most of all it tells us that alone we can do nothing; that we are, as many of us think, incapable, inadequate, sinners lost in a dark world. And then it tells us that we are not alone, that God cares, that God works in the lives of those who believe in him. All we need to do is reach down to that little kernel, that little seed within us and begin to do what it is that we have been called to do and God will do the rest.

There is a Chinese proverb tells us that the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.

Take the step; follow the commands of God, heed his advice found throughout the scriptures and believe that what God has promised will come about. Remember, no matter how small the step you are getting closer to your destination when you take it. But you have to take the step, you have to start claiming God's word as your own if you are to receive what God has promised and do what God has called you to do.