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Isaiah 1:1, 10-20
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Luke 12:32-40

Jesus says, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”

But I think we sometimes may not fear enough. And I think we sometimes fear the wrong things.

In the Bible we often come across the notion of fearing God.¹ For example, Proverbs 9:10 says “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” For much of my life I’ve been taught, and have myself preached, that this is to be understood much more as having a sense of *reverence and awe* than a sense of fear. But it occurs to me that this means we’re at risk of watering things down; at risk of domesticating God.

It occurs to me that when I’m confronted by things that may hurt or destroy me, when I think about the evil-doers, terrorists and tyrants of this world, when I think about the oppression and abuses perpetrated by fallen principalities and powers, when I think about the work of the Evil One ... then I want a big, powerful, *scary* God on my side. I want a big, powerful, scary, warrior God who will fight for me; a scary righteous God who will judge all people and all things, and will set all things to right; the Creator God who cares enough about creation to have engaged himself in a costly project to restore it to full perfection. That’s the kind of God I want, because I know there is so much that needs to be set right.

It seems we often fall into the trap of making some kind of false contrast as we try to describe God’s personality. I have often heard or read of people wanting to make a distinction between, on the one hand, a wrathful and perhaps violent God in the Old Testament, and, on the other, the God of love and of Jesus our brother in the New Testament. There seems to be an underlying assumption that God’s personality

¹ The next few paragraphs owe much to Howard.

must be sorted into one of two categories: either sweet and loving, or really angry and mean.

But God is more than any list of characteristics we can think of. The God who thunders on Mount Sinai is the same God who is present to Elijah in the sound of sheer silence. The God who created all things out of love is the same God who out of that same holy love will judge and set to rights his creation.

Why do we react so strongly against depictions of God as judging and wrathful?

I suspect it is because we are worried lest we be found on the wrong side. While we might be grateful for the idea that God will put things to rights, we may be anxious if we see ourselves as possibly among those that need to be put to rights.

But the thing is, this risk has been addressed completely, once and for all, in the action of God in Jesus going to the cross for us. As Paul wrote to the church in Rome

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. [Romans 8:1-2]

The risk of our being found on the wrong side of the ledger has been addressed in Jesus. This is not something we deserve. This is not something we've earned for ourselves by our good behaviour. It is pure gift: as Jesus said to his disciples "you have been *given* the kingdom".

But we can't then take this gift for granted. Yes, it is not earned by our behaviour; but by our choices and actions we can repudiate it: the gift can be rejected.

Today's first reading is from the first chapter of Isaiah, and it immediately challenges us with the sense of threat as it brings to mind images of a judging, wrathful God.

Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom;
listen to the instruction of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!

By the time of Isaiah, Sodom and Gomorrah are long gone, so the message here is not intended to be directed to rulers of Sodom or to the people of Gomorrah as such.² The message is a warning to rulers and a people who are however at risk of going the same way of destruction. It is to Judah and Jerusalem its capital that Isaiah speaks, and he invokes the devastation of Sodom and Gomorrah to cut through their rationalising self-assurance that has failed to appreciate the seriousness of their offences against God. Sodom and Gomorrah had a lasting reputation not just for their destruction, but also for the offences that brought about their judgement – in Ezekiel we read: “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” [Ezekiel 16:49]

Like these people, Isaiah’s audience seems to have access to substantial resources. Sacrificial offerings of rams, bulls, lambs, and goats were costly; to fatten animals prior to slaughter was more costly still. To provide costly resources for the purpose of worship without correcting systemic injustice means that the community cherishes the *appearance of righteousness over the reality*.

It could of course be argued that worship of God should take priority over everything else. And that has a certain logic to it.

But that logic only holds to the extent we forget the character and purpose of the God we purport to worship.

We get clues to this if we think about the *purpose* of the sacrificial system. It had a strong orientation toward reparation of wrongs, including restitution for damages from economic crimes. The temple sanctuary was the centrally designated place for this worship, which also involved the gathering of tithes and offerings which were used for, among other things, feeding the widows and orphans throughout the land. A stronger clue comes when we recall that the activity of worship in the temple was established around the covenant made on Mount Sinai, a covenant that included laws that had strong regard for justice, economic justice included, and which ensured provision for the poor, marginalised, and oppressed. Disregard for justice was therefore a fundamental violation of that covenant.

² The following draws on Webb, and Portier-Young.

And the strongest clue of all comes when we remember that this covenant was made in the context of liberation from oppression; a covenant made with and for a people who had just been liberated from slavery.

Acts of so-called worship which result in people remaining or becoming impoverished or enslaved are not going to succeed in giving adoration and glory to the God who is all about setting such people free.

Even through our own purchasing choices we can be at work to correct economic injustices in our own day, ensuring that farmers receive a fair and stable living from what they produce, that products are produced in a sustainable environmentally-responsible way, that family and social structures are not fractured by economic need, that companies are not rewarded for the exploitation and enslavement of their workers. There is more that can be done as we advocate and work for a more just world; this is a start at least.

Jesus calls for more than simply that those of us who are relatively well off in the world give or spend charitably and generously (although that is important). Jesus calls that we participate in living in the kingdom, a different world, with different values. What is called for is not just actions that help those with less money; it must be about sharing power and advantage.

At the beginning I said that we sometimes may not fear enough, and I said that I think we sometimes fear the wrong things. If we choose to make our personal purchasing decisions more just, for example, one of the things we have to overcome is our fear that it could cost us more.

Jesus said, Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

But that challenge from Jesus may make us feel anxious. How will we survive without our possessions?

To be free of fear we start from the free gift of God, revealed and lived out in Jesus, who gave his all, dying and rising again for us. With this as our starting point we have a proper idea of what our treasure might be.

If we start from any other place, we are likely to put our hope in our comfort and stability, our achievements, acquisitions, and assets. But what ultimately drives our desire for stability, achievements, acquisitions, and assets? Aren't they all driven out of fear? We fear change, we fear lack of status, we fear insufficiency, we fear insecurity.

And we face a huge battle here, because the world is constantly telling us to fear these things, telling us about the risks we face. Think carefully about the advertising we are bombarded with: so much of it subtly prompts fears, risks, insecurities.

In the 2013 Sci-Fi film *After Earth*, which stars Will Smith and his son Jaden, Smith's character Cypher Raige makes a statement about fear which I think carries a great deal of truth to it:

Fear is not real. The only place that fear can exist is in our thoughts of the future. It is a product of our imagination, causing us to fear things that do not at present and may not ever exist. That is near insanity. Do not misunderstand me, danger is very real, but fear is a choice. We are all telling ourselves a story and those stories can be changed.³

The modern Western world is built on anxiety. You see it on the faces of people hurrying to work. You see it even more as they travel home, tired but without having solved life's problems. The faces are weary, puzzled, living with the unanswerable question as to what it all means. This world thrives on people setting higher and higher goals for themselves, and each other and their employees, so that they can worry all day and all year about whether they will reach them. If they do reach their goals, they will be set new ones. If they don't they will feel they've failed. Was this really how we were supposed to live?⁴

³ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1815862/quotes> Slightly modified.

⁴ Wright, *Luke*, p.151

The world is built on anxiety. The world is telling itself a story, and that story can be changed.

The writer to the Hebrews encourages a different type of story: *Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*

The first step to telling ourselves a different story is to start with the one who made the world and who made it for a purpose, with a future to look forward to.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews notes that the patriarchs were longing for another country, a heavenly one.

We too look forward to the time when God's kingly reign is made complete over earth as well as heaven.

Rather than telling ourselves stories of fear of things (things we should not be fearful of), Jesus encourages us to tell a different story – to focus on treasure in heaven. What he is talking about is that the kingdom of God is bringing the values and priorities of God himself to bear on the greed and anxiety of the world.⁵

Those who welcome Jesus and his kingdom-message must learn to abandon greed and the world's fears, and live by the values and priorities of God.

And to conclude, I want to remind you of the character of God. This God, who cares so much about justice that he has acted, and continues to act, so strongly and decisively in judgement, is the same God who in Jesus provides the surprise of love and grace. Jesus says "It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them."

This master has the character of the suffering servant, the Son of God who washes his disciples' feet, the king of glory who came not to be served but to serve, the one who prepares a heavenly banquet for us. This too is the nature of our God, our gracious and abundantly generous God.

Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Let us not be afraid!

⁵ Wright, *Luke*, pp.153-154

Sources:

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