

Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid

Why do we fear? Fear is a universal human experience. None of us are completely free of fear of one kind or another. Sometimes life 'teaches' us to fear. We have experiences that we remember and we are afraid of them happening again. There are associations we make which produce fear in us or we mentally predict the outcomes of situations, and that brings fear. We can be afraid of what is unknown and what is out of our control, of upcoming events and things we must face and things that are not there at all. I remember my great-grandmother, a wonderful, no-nonsense, upright Presbyterian woman, saying, "Step ahead gaily, the trouble up ahead isn't there"! Each one of us would have things in our lives that we recognize as triggers of fear and that we do our best to avoid. Sometimes we invest a lot of emotional energy in those fearful imaginings. In terms of the evolution of our species, as with that of all other species, we are hard-wired to fear. Fear is necessary for our survival. We need to be able to sense what is threatening to us and take action to avoid it. In this sense, fear is a positive thing and it is there to safeguard life and the future of life. But fear can do just the opposite. Our fears can define our lives, setting parameters around what we will try or do. These fears can be utterly debilitating and if we are not careful can lead to severely diminished lives. There is also a pervasive, general fear that is common to all humanity and that is what we might call an existential fear. It is the fear of our own nothingness, our own mortality and often much angst is produced by this fear. This existential fear has also produced some of the most powerful art, music and literature and much energy often goes into the rage against it, as the poet Dylan Thomas exclaimed, "Do not go gentle into that good night / Old age should burn and rage at close of day / Rage, rage against the dying of the light".

Given that fear is such an integral part of our human experience, it is not surprising that our Christian Tradition has a lot to teach us about how to handle fear. There are hundreds of references to fear and exhortations to 'not fear' in the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures. Biblical spirituality offers us a vision of what life might be like free of fear. It is invitational, descriptive of what might be, of what is possible. "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid", said Jesus (John 14:27). These are probably some of the most oft-repeated words of Jesus and they are very comforting. I remember sitting at my mother's funeral service a few years ago, in a Presbyterian church in South Africa, listening to the minister preaching and speaking words of life and hope, and as he spoke those words of Jesus everything seemed 'okay' – the pain and sadness was shot through with comfort and reassurance. Jesus never says that the fears we hold and that well up inside us are not real, that they don't exist. He never disregards our deeply human tendency to fear. Rather he looks directly into it and invites us into a place where we can continue to live and thrive and not be defined by our fear. "In the world you will have tribulation", he says, "but be of good cheer for I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Let's take a look at Jesus' own experience of fear, for his own struggle has much to say to us. In the Gospel of Luke, in his account of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane the night of his arrest, after his last meal with his disciples, we find Jesus entering into the depths of fear, just as any of us can do. He would have been deeply aware of his impending arrest and the likely consequences of that, and we are told that as he prayed and asked God to take away that cup of suffering, he sweated drops of blood. We now know that this is entirely possible and is an actual medical condition brought on by extreme stress, and that when people are in situations of profound angst tiny capillaries close to the surface of the skin can burst and it can indeed appear that one is sweating blood. What we learn from this is that Jesus was afraid. And he had some options. He could have run away. But he did not. The darkness of the desert night could have been his place of refuge and he could have avoided what was to come. But he stayed. He looked to his friends, but they were asleep. There was no refuge there. He pleaded with God to let the suffering pass him by. But as he remained in prayer, he 'moved'. What brought resolution was his surrender. He let go and he abandoned himself utterly into the hands of God. Jesus went into the places we instinctively go when we are afraid. He looked for support in others, he pleaded with God - and don't we do that too!

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Fear penetrates our deep instinct for survival, for life. So we want to avoid it at all costs. But Jesus shows us that it is not by running away that we will overcome fear. Instead he invites us to enlarge our horizons and allow a wider, deeper perspective to raise us up. As he himself did in the garden of Gethsemane, we are invited to surrender to this.

You would all be familiar with the well-known story of Jesus calming the storm which is found in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus and his disciples were out in a boat when a storm arose. The boat was tossed around and the wild and turbulent waters seemed to be about to engulf them. They were afraid – and the Master was asleep! Finally Jesus awoke to their cries. He 'rebuked' the storm and calm returned, and he rebuked the fearful disciples too. Why are you so fearful? Where is your faith? This story is often understood as one that shows the lordship of Jesus over creation – in other words, it is a story which reveals his identity as divine, as in Jewish thinking it is only God who is Lord of creation. But there is more to this story. As he rebukes them for lack of faith, Jesus reminds the group in the boat, and he reminds us too, that to let ourselves be confined and prescribed by our fears is indeed to perish. When we focus solely on the 'turbulent waves', we lose sight of that greater reality that is indeed the context of our very existence.

There is another Gospel story too that invites us into this greater vision, this wider universe that we are part of. It also has to do with a boat and a storm and it is the story of Peter walking on the water (Matthew 14: 22 – 33). The disciples had got into a boat and had set out while Jesus

went up a mountain to pray, however, during the night strong winds arose and the boat, far from land, was battered by waves. In the midst of this confusion Jesus came to them walking on the water, but this only added to their fear, as they thought he was a ghost. But he called out to them and reassured them, and then Peter, always the impetuous one, asked Jesus to command him to come to him across the water, which Jesus did. “Come”, he said, and Peter set out. But when he saw the strong wind he became frightened and began to sink. He called out, “Lord save me”! Jesus reached out, took his hand and said those words we have heard before, “You of little faith, why did you doubt”? And they got into the boat together and the wind ceased.

Like the other story, this one too – as one of the so-called ‘nature miracles’ - is seen as an affirmation of Jesus’ divine identity, but as with the other one, this too is a wonderful and insightful human story, and an invitation to allow what is sacred – God – to penetrate the depths of our humanity. Amidst the confusion of the wind and the fear of perishing, Peter finally settled his gaze on Jesus and began to move out of that small vision, out of his limited focus. But again his attention was caught by the waves, he lost sight of Jesus once again, he shifted his focus back to what was threatening, and again, as Jesus reached out to him, he was finally free of it.

This to and fro movement is very much the pattern of our dealings with fear. It is difficult not to become exclusively focused on what we are afraid of, on our anxiety. But we are constantly invited to take the ‘hand’ that is offered to us. These stories bring the sacred into the very ordinariness and depth of what it means to be human. We live in ambiguity. We believe and we doubt at the same time. We move in and out of moments of insight and certainty and moments of limited vision that entrap us in fear. Part of the problem is that we equate belief and even trust with what we *think*, we try to make it a purely rational choice that we must apply to our lives. But these stories lead us to see that our human ambiguity can only be resolved by living the choice, by letting our world be touched and enlarged as we live our way into this new way of seeing and being.

American spiritual writer, Kathleen Norris, has written much about her journey back into faith after a period of time when it all fell apart for her, and back into a community of faith, the church. She is the author of the well-known book, *Cloister Walk*, which is also available as audio and is well worth reading or listening to. But in another of her books, *Amazing Grace*, she writes of her struggle with doubt:

“When I first stumbled upon the Benedictine abbey where I am now an oblate, I was surprised to find the monks so unconcerned with my weighty doubts and intellectual frustrations over Christianity. What interested them more was my desire to come to their worship, the liturgy of the hours. I was a bit disappointed – I had thought that my doubts were spectacular obstacles

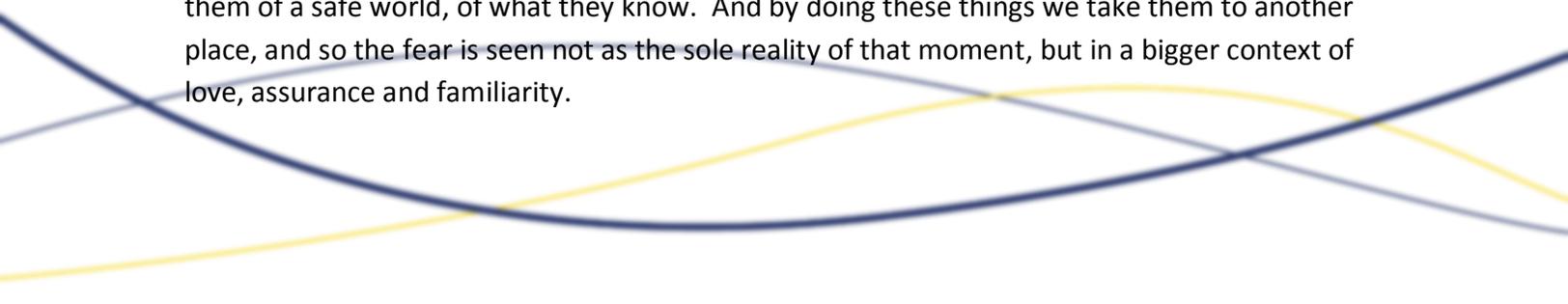
to my faith and was confused but intrigued when an old monk blithely stated that doubt is merely the seed of faith, a sign that faith is alive and ready to grow. I am grateful now for his wisdom and grateful for the community for teaching me about the power of liturgy. They seemed to believe that if I just kept coming back to worship, kept coming home, things would eventually fall into place”.

Norris has identified something absolutely essential here. While reason, intellectual enquiry and rational argument are all essential, there does come a moment when we simply need to live the choice. We need to immerse ourselves in all that expresses faith, in the language, images, words and rituals of faith. This will touch something deep in us for there is memory within us that goes far deeper than intellectual argument can satisfy.

She continues:

“Remembering helped; it helped enormously. Believing in God, listening to Bible stories, and especially singing in church on Sunday mornings had been among the greatest joys of my childhood. And when I would remember that, a modicum of faith would enter my heart, a conviction that God who had given me all that would be likely to do so again. But if I had to find one word to describe how belief came to take hold in me, it would be ‘repetition’. Repetition, as Kierkegaard understood it, as ‘the daily bread of life that satisfies with benediction’. Repetition as in a hymn such as ‘Amazing Grace’, or the ballad form in poetry, where although the refrain is the same from stanza to stanza, it conveys something different each time it is repeated because of what is in the lines that have come in between. Over time, it was the ordinary events of life itself, coming ‘in between’ the refrain of the church service, with its familiar creeds, hymns, psalms, and scripture stories, that most developed my religious faith. Worship summed it up and held it together, and it all came to seem like a ballad to me, one that I was living”.

It is not simply assent on an intellectual level that will enable us to overcome fear and help us deal positively with it. It requires more than just a rational affirmation of what we believe, although that certainly is part of it. What we need to do is immerse ourselves in the powerful symbols and images that express that other reality that will in fact be our salvation. And we need to do this repeatedly. Those of us who are parents know that when our children are afraid or wake in the night after a bad dream, we comfort them and reassure them by telling them there is nothing to be afraid of, but we also go beyond the verbal. We surround them with something other than the fear. We hold them, stroke their forehead, perhaps read them a story, make them a hot drink. We do all those familiar and comforting things that speak to them of a safe world, of what they know. And by doing these things we take them to another place, and so the fear is seen not as the sole reality of that moment, but in a bigger context of love, assurance and familiarity.



Liturgy works in the same way and I do believe that immersing ourselves in such experiences is essential. In our Catholic Tradition we have two main forms of liturgy that are the formal daily prayer of the Church. The one is the Liturgy of the Hours, or the Divine Office, which is prayed throughout the day traditionally in monastic communities and forms the heart of their lives. It is based on the Psalms and over time all 150 Psalms are prayed, and then the cycle begins again. This is also prayed by many people outside of monasteries too and is a most beautiful practice. The other daily liturgy is the Eucharist. Each time we celebrate the Eucharist we tell that two thousand year old story – and we do it again and again - that colours our lives today. We call this the Eucharistic prayer, and it is a remembering. It is the story of the meeting of God and humanity, of God reaching out and touching humanity. ‘Eucharist’ comes from the Greek word *eucharistia*, which means ‘to give thanks’. In the telling of the story we give thanks to God, for we know that because of that story we are not trapped in our small world, in our fears and anxieties. But we need to hear it more than once, and more than just occasionally. Repetition is important and it is not without good reason that the Church celebrates the Eucharist every day.

We need to be constantly reminded because we move in and out of remembering. We sometimes remember and we sometimes forget what we can be, and where and how God is touching our lives. Just as Peter went astray and lost sight of Jesus in spite of every good intention to do otherwise, and so began to flounder, so do we. There is something so reassuring and comforting about those familiar words, that ritual of the Eucharist. We don’t have to think, we don’t remain in a head space, we simply surrender to it and let it penetrate our deepest needs and fears, our dreams and our lives. As we have seen, in that story of Jesus walking on water there is a wonderful interplay between Peter and Jesus and it happens in the darkness of fear. But the invitation is there, repeatedly. It is interesting that Matthew sets this story immediately following the story of the feeding of the five thousand people when Jesus took a few loaves and fish and with those he fed the hungry crowd. This ‘miracle’ story too is invitational. We are invited to let sacredness touch the ordinariness of life. God is there in our deepest and most basic needs – our hunger on all levels – and this adds to the poignancy, I think, of Peter’s impetuous launching out to Jesus across the water and his beginning to sink when he took his gaze off Jesus. He had forgotten how he had just been fed! How often we need that invitation. How repeatedly we need to respond to it and let our vision and our living be changed.

The Gospels also have a number of stories of people set free by Jesus from the kind of fear which cripples and limits our lives. There are two that come to mind immediately and they both vividly illustrate what happens. One is the story of the woman Jesus met at the well. She was a Samaritan woman and an outcast in her village because of the numerous husbands she had had. She was ashamed and shunned by the villagers and as a result she removed herself

from the normal practice of the day when the women would gather at the well outside the town early in the morning. As they performed their daily chore of fetching water they would socialize too. But community, the assurance of companionship, were not for her. Her world was limited, for she had developed the habit of going out alone to the well in the heat of the day to avoid being seen and shunned. It was there she had that encounter with Jesus which changed her life and set her free from her fear. Jesus took her beyond that crippling fear and his conversation with her touched her to the core, she felt known and accepted, and it was that embrace that returned her life to her, and she went back to the village a changed woman.

The other story is also about a woman, a woman who wept at Jesus' feet. All we know of her is that she was considered a sinner. She too was living on the margins of respectability and we can only imagine that the angst and emptiness and shame she felt were so great that they drew her to Jesus. She went into the house of a Pharisee who was hosting a dinner and she stood at Jesus' feet and wept, anointing them with the ointment she had brought and drying them with her long hair. Jesus' response to her set her free. He did not scorn her as Simon did, pointing to the fact that she was not a good type, but instead he pointed to the great love she showed, and so she was given a new vision of herself. In both stories we see women set free from the pain and fear that circumscribed their lives and their sense of self.

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We are all afraid at times. Perhaps that fear is even persistent and debilitating. But Jesus himself shows us the way out of fear and he reaches out to all of us immersed in fear. This is our great Christian story, and we are invited to see everything in the light of this story, to enter the story ourselves and let it become our own. We have a beautiful and powerful tradition of liturgy and we are invited to immerse ourselves in this, repeatedly. We know from learning theory that our brains are wired to be selective and to choose those things that are necessary for survival and necessary for a good level of functioning. The brain doesn't retain what is not useful or needed. It is through repetition that deep learning will occur. And in the same way, as we tell and re-tell our story, as we immerse ourselves in it repeatedly, that practice, that repetition, will ensure over time that these truths become more and more real to us, and touch us more and more deeply. Just as we hold our children when they are afraid, let us not draw back from letting God hold us.

Kerry McCullough
Dean of Mission

