

Go unafraid: Matthew 10: 24-39 & Romans 6: 1b-11
Sermon for Sunday 21 June 2020 by Rev Phil Wootton

I like to think of myself as a calm and sensible sort of person. When, at the start of the pandemic, all the talk was about panic buying, I had a wry smile: aren't people silly! Now I have a confession to make: I have made purchases in a panic. Until now I've kept to the calm advice about hygiene: that soap and water does the job on your hands, and, on surfaces, normal detergent is as effective as anything. But in Sainsburys the other day, needing one or two replacements, I panicked! So much choice! So many options! What if I was following the wrong advice? Shouldn't I invest in a product 'guaranteed to kill 99.5% of all bacteria'? But then it's a virus we're trying to kill, not bacteria, so had I better find an anti-viral spray? Then we're an eco-church, so I need something that's environmentally friendly. Time's up! Grab one of each! Buy! Buy! Buy! Oh no! I've become a panic buyer! I'm shopping out of fear.

It surprises many people that the most common command in the Bible is not on the lines of loving one another or believing in God, but simply, 'Do not be afraid.' Conquering our fear seems to be the biggest hurdle humanity faces. In today's passage Jesus three times tells his listeners not to be afraid (in verses 26, 28 and 31). Now, when the world has almost stopped out of fear of infection, one of our big challenges is to know the difference between sensible precautions and lives run by fear.

In Matthew 10, Jesus sends the Twelve disciples to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (v6) and the theme of his teaching is about just how they should go out. For us today, as lock-down is gradually lifted, the questions on our own minds are very much about whether, when and how it is right for us to go out. Although the context is hugely different, I think there are principles embedded in Jesus' words that apply to us now. The central principle is, 'Do not be afraid'.

First, he seems to be saying, don't be afraid of what other people think. Perhaps because of the frustrations of lockdown, there is a tendency for people to be more judgemental than usual; to be critical of others who make different decisions from themselves. We each have individual circumstances and levels of vulnerability, so we each have to work things out for ourselves, not criticise others and not fear their criticism. If 'what is whispered in secret' will be 'shouted from the rooftops' (v27) let's just make sure we speak and act with integrity. Don't follow the crowd out of fear.

Don't be afraid of what the family thinks, either. Family opposition is to be expected. Obviously, here (verses 34-38) Jesus is talking about divisions over being a Christian, and he is claiming people's first loyalty for himself. But in our context today, it strikes me from one or two conversations that families can

stoke up fears out of their very love and concern for one another. 'You mustn't go out in case you get infected.' For some, who are exceptionally vulnerable, this is sound advice. But for others, it can create a spiral of fear as each tries to protect the other all the more. Remember, perfect love is about driving out fear. Factor in our loving heavenly Father, who knows intimately even the tiniest creature in all his creation, and who even counts the hairs on our heads (although, as I look at myself in the screen filming this, I can't help reflecting that counting hairs is less challenging than once it was.)

Having said that, don't be afraid of sacrifice: it's part of the Christian life. The word 'sacrifice' may have been over used in recent times but that's not to downplay the very real sacrifices many have made. For the Christian, we always keep in our minds the ultimate sacrifice Jesus made for the sake of the whole world. He calls his followers to join him on that same road, to carry our own cross (in whatever form that may take). This is normal Christian life. So, don't be afraid of it. St Paul wrote in Romans 5: 3-5, 'we rejoice in our sufferings, because suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, character hope; and hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.'

Jesus does tell us to be afraid of one thing – not 'what kills the body' but be afraid of one 'who can kill both body and soul' (v28). We spend a lot of time and effort on good hygiene – sensible precautions. Fine, but are we equally rigorous in our precautions against spiritual damage, because this is a much worse contamination. Greed, selfishness, looking after number one – these are the things that corrupt. In today's passage from Romans, Paul wrote of our sins being buried through Christ's death. Unfortunately, we can be prone to digging them up again. Sin is like a slavery: once it's got a hold it's very hard to be free. So we need to pray, as the old collect says, that '*we may so pass through things temporal that we lose not our hold on things eternal.*' But do not be afraid: as in Christ we died to sin, so we are united with him in his resurrection.

Matthew's Gospel contains five blocks of Jesus' teaching, and in chapter 10 Jesus is teaching his disciples (or 'learners') how to go out and become apostles ('ones who are sent'). It is clear he anticipates that they will face opposition and adversity in many ways. This will not stop them learning. Indeed, it's by coming through adversity that they will learn most about what it is to be a disciple. Our current time of adversity is of a very different form but is nonetheless very real, and it has not finished yet. If we are to come through stronger, we must have been ready to use it as a learning experience – learning from Christ. And as we think about how we come out as lockdown eases, as we think through the issues and challenges we face, we do so with Jesus' words ringing in our ears: 'Do not be afraid.'