

Fear is a strange thing. It creeps up on us often when we least expect it. Sometimes our fears are life long – ask anyone like myself who has a fear of spiders! But often fears are short lived, or contextual. Today each of our readings addressing the question of fear or anxiety in a different ways, fear that is experienced for different reasons, and by different people.

In the Harry Potter series there is a creature called a Boggart which lives in dark places, in cupboards and under stairs and is a shape shifter. No one knows what a Boggart looks like because when it is let out it assumes the shape of the thing which the person most fears. I wonder what shape a Boggart would take if we stood in front of it?

If Jeremiah stood before a Boggart I wonder if he would see himself. In the passage we heard this morning he seems to be experiencing some kind of vocational crisis. We meet Jeremiah today around the midpoint of his ministry. The Babylonian empire under Nebuchadnezzar began expanding in the Middle East and Israel's existence was threatened<sup>1</sup>. Jeremiah warned Israel about this threat, believing that he had received such warning words from God. But the people denounced him (see 20:10). Jeremiah feels caught in the middle, squeezed between a God who has insisted that he preach this difficult word of warning and a people who refuse to believe him. He is stuck between an insistent God and a resistant people. Jeremiah begins then to question his purpose; to fear for his life and for his future. He is unsure about what to do for the best.

As I spent some time in prayer and reflection this week I could relate to Jeremiah a little. Torn between many realities, all of which were true. On the one hand the church has been closed, by law for more than 3 months and many are frustrated by the slow return, and what is seen by some of 'failure to understand the importance of the physical church'. On the other hand is the fact that our faith is more than the church building and there is much for us to be getting on with in prayer and action, whether our buildings are open or not. Then there is all the work we are doing to prepare our buildings to re-open, cleaning, new systems, risk assessments. And then there is the painful reality that the Pandemic is continuing, that people continue to die and many feel afraid and uncertain. And then there are those who are clinging to faith to hold them through this crisis, longing for the day we might receive communion again. In the end there are so many unknowns that it will be only as we inhabit the spaces again that we might be know truly what our thoughts are. Like Jeremiah some days it can be hard to know what to do for the best!

I suspect what we fear in this, may well depend what we hear in this and what we believe. Of course we want our churches to be open, they are important to us, but one of the question I felt challenged to consider this week is what do I fear about them opening, or not opening? Maybe we might each need to ask ourselves the same

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1944](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1944)

question. Do I have a purpose, a faith – if the church is open or closed? Maybe we can all relate to Jeremiah's predicament more than we realise!

Fear in many ways is what Matthew's Jesus is addressing as he continues to help the disciples understand that they must imitate him. In Jesus time to be a disciple was to be student who went and lived with the teacher you were seeking to emulate. Discipleship literally means being a student, but not as we might understand student as a person who turns up once a week or day for a lecture, rather a student is one who commits to living in the same atmosphere and breathing the same air, so that you might not miss any pearls of wisdom or learning that they might offer.

We need to understand this concept of discipleship and even being a student, if we are to get the most out of our readings today – where Jesus is explaining how the disciples are called to live. Disciples as Rowan Williams<sup>2</sup> puts it are those who 'are looking and listening without interruption'.

Matthew is recording how Jesus prepared the disciples for the mission they are called to – one which will call on them to imitate Jesus in many, if not all, ways.<sup>3</sup>

It is actually an incredibly challenging passage. It is not that we can choose to engage with the bits of God, or the life of Jesus which are comfortable or palatable – but rather that we let God inhabit, and deal within each part of our journey. Like Jeremiah they needed to learn to live in the fear and uncertainty. This is also what we are called to, to inhabit God's journey in the way that we live. That means as hard as it is we need to inhabit the place we are in now with God as uncomfortable as it might be. Even if it is not what we think the Church is, God invites to inhabit and learn.

And like the disciples we will learn of course, that this isn't always easy, or comfortable or even straight forward. That is what the writer of Matthew is trying to spell out in this passage today. When you seek to live with personal integrity, when you seek to reflect the teaching of another, when you seek to inhabit an alternate space to that of the community in which you live – there will at times be discord. But Jesus is not saying that it has to be this way – or that we need to create divisions – but he is preparing the disciples for the fact that sometimes, even with all the best intentions of peace in the world, divisions occur. This was important for the disciples to hear because they were in such a 'Jesus bubble' sometimes they might forget to hostile community within they live.

I don't know if you have ever had that experience – maybe when you have been retreat or a lecture or even to a worship service – for that moment it feels like the only reality. That everyone must be feeling the way – that the world must all agree

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<sup>2</sup> Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian life By Rowan Williams

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3303](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3303)

with this amazing experience. And then you come home! Jesus had to remind the disciples that not everyone would embrace his teaching as they had.

David Lose, whose blog on the readings I read each week had a solid warning about the way that this passage might be interpreted as an excuse for conflict – rather he says we have a responsibility to recognise that our situation is very different from the one that Matthew is addressing. He suggests that we speak the truth as we believe we've received it and to advocate for justice as we perceive it. But precisely because we know that truth is something we can confess but never possess, to do so in a way that doesn't shut down other voices, refuse to listen to other opinions, or cut off those who believe differently<sup>4</sup>.

As we confront our fears about our current situation, we too need to be open to the voices of each other, and be aware of where God is with us in this place. We have a responsibility to keep our ears and eyes open – to be aware of what God is saying to us now as we prepare to return to our buildings. To be listen for how God wants us to inhabit these spaces in new or different ways, not just assume God wants us to return to the status quo.

The second part of this passage is about hope in the face of fear. Whatever we inhabit, whatever we face – we never do it alone. *“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? .... And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.” “Do not be afraid” – the hallmark of the Gospel and words we cannot say too frequently in a world so marked by fear. “Do not be afraid” “You are of great value”.*<sup>5</sup>

Whatever we fear – and there is much fear around us at this time – we need to remember God is with us. We are called to live as people of faith with integrity. And like the disciples that means we inhabit the teachings of Jesus and listen for what action they require from us.

The reality of course is that we don't always see things as others see it. Sometimes when we inhabit a new space, or even the same space with new eyes, we see all sorts of things we didn't notice before.

Matthew Gospel reminds us that as we inhabit a 'new normal', as we encounter our changing world - there will be things to embrace and things to be wary of – but whatever we face we are not alone – and whatever we face we need to do so with integrity and with our eyes open with the eyes of Christ. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/06/pentecost-3-a-two-timely-truths/>

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