

To Fear or Not to Fear

A sermon on Matthew 10:24-39 & Genesis 21:8-21 by Nathan Nettleton, 25 June 2017

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Message

In a world dominated by terror and fear, Jesus tells us that becoming the victims of that world is not nearly as dangerous as becoming part of it.

Sermon

Do you know which command is repeated in the Bible more than any other? If you listen to my preaching often, you are probably expecting me to say that it is the command to love. Actually, it's not. The most often repeated command, and it appeared three times in tonight's gospel reading, is "Don't be afraid."

Arguably, that is very close to the command to love. Our local prophet, Michael Leunig, has said that "there are only two feelings, two languages, two activities, two motives: love and fear." If he's right, and the teaching of Jesus seems to back him up on this, then the opposite of love is not hate, but fear, and so "Don't be afraid" is simply the other side of the command to love. But the Bible gives us this command most often in the form of "Don't be afraid."

Now you may immediately be thinking that that seems like too much to ask in today's world. We live in a world that is full of fear, and full of people who are more than willing to fuel that fear and exploit that fear. Every few days there seems to be another random attack on ordinary civilians for the specific purpose of terrorising people. Why would we not be afraid? How can we not be afraid? Surely if Jesus had lived in our day and age, he wouldn't have been so naive.

Well actually, Jesus spoke these words in a world that was every bit as violent as the world we live in. He lived in an era where sports stadiums drew crowds to watch gladiators fight to the death, or to watch prisoners being fed to lions or burned alive. He lived in a country under military occupation where an ultra-nationalist terrorist group waged a guerrilla war both against the Roman soldiers and against any of their own neighbours who they deemed guilty of being too accepting of the Romans.

In fact, you are far far less likely to be a victim of violence today than at any previous time in history, especially in a country like this. But of course, modern technology means that although acts of deadly violence are rarer today, they can be more terrifyingly destructive, and you are more likely to hear about them and see frightening pictures of the destruction. And that is what terror and fear feed on.

When Jesus tells his followers not to be afraid, it doesn't seem to have anything to do with a naive belief that there is no reason for fear. He seems all too well aware of the reasons for fear. Not only was he increasingly aware of the deadly opposition that was closing in on him, but he has just been telling his followers that they are likely to be persecuted by both legal authorities and ordinary people in a world that is dangerously divided and at war with itself. Clearly there is plenty that they could be afraid of, just as there is for us.

So what is Jesus saying when he says "Don't be afraid"? Is he saying, "Don't worry, God will look after you"? Well, sort of. But it's not the first thing he says, and he certainly doesn't say it

in any simplistic partisan way. He is certainly not saying that God plays favourites and will offer special protection to Christians while other people will be left unprotected. As I said, Jesus has just been telling his followers that they will be persecuted. At the beginning of the section we heard, Jesus pointed out that people were accusing him of being the prince of demons, and so his followers could expect the same. This is anything but a promise that following Jesus will give you some kind of immunity.

There are three things that Jesus says here by way of explanation for his instruction, “Don’t be afraid.” The three are all connected to each other, and I’m a little bit unsure of which one to start with in explaining them, so I’m going to stick with his order. Let me name all three first and then unpack them one at a time.

Jesus says, 1) don’t be afraid of them because everything that is being hushed up is going to be brought out in the open and the truth is going to be revealed; 2) don’t be afraid of them because the worst that they can do is kill you and there is something much worse than that which you really should be afraid of; and 3) don’t be afraid of them because God really really cares about you and loves you. Now, one at a time, although I can’t entirely separate them from one another.

The truth is going to be brought out into the open. Don’t panic; he’s not talking about your personal secrets! He is talking about the truth of the way things are; of our world, our culture, our religion; of the system that keeps things the way they are.

This idea of a hidden truth being uncovered appears quite often in the New Testament writings. Elsewhere, both Jesus and the Apostle Paul talk about the coming revelation of things hidden from the foundation of the world. We sometimes hear this wrongly and imagine that they are talking about some grand plan that God has kept hidden, but they never say that God has hidden anything, and in this reading tonight, when Jesus says “don’t be afraid of them because everything that is being covered up is going to be uncovered”, it is perfectly obvious that it is “them” who are covering things up and them who have reason to fear it all being brought out into the open.

So what is it that will be revealed? To answer that properly, I need to move onto the second and third points, but for now let’s just say that it is the lies that told, or the great fraud that is maintained, to keep things the way they are by keeping us afraid. Don’t be afraid, it will all be made clear and the truth will be known. I’ll revisit this after points two and three.

The second reason Jesus gives for not being afraid of a violent world is that there is something much much worse than being a victim of violence. But this is possibly one of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible, and it is probably fair to say that the misunderstanding is a product of that great cover-up that is going to be exposed.

A fairly literal translation of the verse sees Jesus saying, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” And the mistake that is commonly made is to think that “the one we should fear”, “the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell” is God. To caricature it, that would have Jesus saying, “Don’t be scared of extreme violence because God is much more scary than even the most violent people.”

Now there is no question that it was commonly taught that you should fear God, and there is no question that the Bible contains passages that say that. But this is not one of them, and in fact, Jesus seems to be directly challenging that view right here. Because the very next thing he says, our third point, is that God really really loves you and really really cares about you, and that God even cares tenderly about every sparrow that falls to the ground and God cares about you far far more than that sparrow. Jesus is contrasting these two images, not saying they are one and the same. He is not saying that God is a two-faced monster who acts all caring about a sparrow one minute and then sets about torturing people in hellfire for eternity the next.

But this is precisely where these three points all connect up and I can't really separate them. You see, the great conspiracy, the great lie, that is used to justify the way things are and keep us afraid and in line and cooperating with the powers that be says that God is an angry violent God and that the reason that the world is an angry violent place is that it is governed by an angry violent God, and the world really is divided into *us* who fearfully obey God and *them* who are dangerous sinners who God wants to destroy and who we as God's agents might as well destroy first lest they corrupt and pollute us with their evil influence.

Even in the modern secular west where it has become rare to appeal directly to an image of God to justify our actions, the same lie simply continues, concealed under others names and other guises. We hear government ministers telling us that it is absolutely justified to cast people into eternal torment in offshore detention hells, because to do otherwise would allow dangerous *them* to threaten the national values and freedoms and culture of the chosen *us*. They even admit that this mistreatment is intended to deter other people from coming, which means that it is an action designed to cause fear and terror. If we are deliberately persecuting people in order to bring about change by causing terror in other people, are we not a terrorist state? But the lie seeks to keep it covered up and paint it as the will of a holy God.

In the churches, the great lie continues to use more religious language, and thus we are told that fundamentalists or homosexuals or whoever are the sinners of the month are an abomination to a holy God and a threat to the purity of God's people and so they must be shunned and denounced and persecuted and purged from our midst, and although we are not allowed to cast them into the fire ourselves anymore, we can confidently know that God will.

But Jesus is tearing the cover off this great lie. The exposé still has a way to go, but the crucial crack that allowed the light in was Jesus's own crucifixion. Because in that moment when all the religious and political powers joined forces to purge the world of a "dangerous sinner", our eyes were suddenly opened to the fact that when we get whipped into a frenzy of zeal to purge the world of the evil other, we lose the capacity to discern between good and evil at all and we can end up pointing angry fingers at one who is the most perfect embodiment of God's love and goodness, and chanting "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

The one who Jesus says we should be afraid of, the one who he contrasts with God who cares intimately even for the sparrows, the one who he says can destroy your humanity entirely in the fires of hell, is the one the Bible calls the accuser, the satan, the finger-pointer-in-chief. Whether or not he has an existence as an individual personal being is irrelevant, because he has a existence in our collective hearts and minds whenever we get sucked into his finger pointing and his purity crusades and his border protection. He exists in our collective desire to

protect *us* by casting out them, to pass laws and erect walls to again cast out Ishmael and his children in favour of “our chosen children”.

When we hear ultra-nationalists saying that islamists driving a van into a crowd on London Bridge is evil terrorism, but a British nationalist driving a van into a crowd of worshippers outside a mosque is not terrorism but a justified revenge attack, we are hearing that same satanic lie wrapped in a different flag.

Be afraid of that lie, of that belief structure, says Jesus, because if you get sucked into it and become a part of it, it will consume you and dehumanise you and destroy you, body and soul. If you resist the system and refuse to participate in its deadly finger-pointing, then you may become a victim of it and be killed by it. Jesus doesn't promise protection from that. In fact he shows us the wounds in his hands and his side and tells us to take up our cross and be ready for it.

But there's the truth being uncovered. The man who is showing us the deadly wounds in his hands and side is a man who has already fallen victim and been killed, but here he is among us, more alive than ever, and warning us that there are things far more deadly than becoming a victim of deadly violence. The thing that you should most fear is becoming complicit, becoming a participant in that crusading finger-pointing hostility. That's the most deadly thing of all, Jesus is saying, because once you start lighting the fires of hell, there is little chance you will ever be able to outrun them, and they will consume you, body and soul.

Jesus warns us that this great uncovering will not be a peaceful event. “Don't think I've come to bring peace to the earth,” he says. When I expose the lies that you use to divide us from them in the name of God, you will have a choice. Some of you will choose my path of love and forgiveness and reconciliation, and others will choose to cling to the lies and try to make them work again, and in the process, new fault lines will open up and cause new divisions, often splitting right through the old “us” of family and nation.

So there's something to really be afraid of, says Jesus, but do not be afraid!

Do not be afraid because the exposure of the truth will also expose the way of escape, the pathway of life, the entrance into the promised land of the loving Father who cares intimately for even the sparrows and knows every hair on your head. Do not be afraid because God is not a terrifying two-faced monster. Do not be afraid, because God is exactly like Jesus, welcoming all from both sides of our hostile divides, reconciling Ishmael and Isaac, making all feel safe and beloved in his care, and willing to suffer the full force of hell's bitterness and rage rather than sell us out to it even for a moment.

Do not be afraid, because even if the dying world does its worst to you and, like Jesus, you become one of its many fatalities, they can get only your body, and you will rise with Jesus, every bit as vibrantly alive as the one who welcomes us to this table and feeds us for the journey into the promised land of love and life. Be not afraid. Come, eat, drink, pray, love, and live.