

The Second Sunday of Easter

The Gospel reading for this week is John 20:19-31

“...the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.”

Fear is a powerful emotion. Fear is of course essential for survival. Things that frighten us are usually things that can hurt us so we are hard-wired not to fall out of trees, go play with tigers or poke bishops with a pointy stick.

In my conversations with people I hear voices bearing anxiety. Medical staff whose vocation is to heal and make better, who know they are losing too many battles. There is a fear for their own safety and those they love. There is fear for those they care for and serve. There is an unspoken fear that failure to heal is something they cannot bear to endure. The greatest fear is not for their safety but of being overwhelmed by the demands placed upon them.

I have listened to people who have someone who works on another frontline, schools, care homes, supermarkets, transport, public services. We can do something, a simple thank you goes a long way. When I ring a local funeral director, people doing an essential though usually ignored job, I do not end the call when arrangements are complete, “How are you? How are things going during these very strange times?” It is appreciated. This is a time when small kindnesses matter.

There are good reasons to face fear. Those who have spent years, generations, building a business, working the land, raising livestock, now facing a situation that cannot be controlled. Whether it be pouring gallons of milk into drains or not knowing if a business can survive, these are frightening times.

The unknown is frightening, one reason we sometimes ignore things we would rather not know about. As ever, T S Eliot’s words come back to mind, “Humanity cannot bear too much reality.” We know the terrible numbers do not tell the whole story. The number of people infected and the number of people dying are not the real totals. Neither are the known instances of domestic violence and people whose mental health is suffering. These are times when it is healthy to acknowledge that which is fearful. That is the first step to conquering fear.

But there is unhealthy fear as well – the kind of fear that generate fakes news, delivers over-simplistic criticism, spreads rumour and gossip, or seeks to exploit. You don’t go far without coming across it. Whether it be on the internet via social media or the person in the supermarket queue talking with authority about something they know nothing about. Name it as the voice of fear that destroys and degrades, and keep it at arm’s length.

St John wrote his gospel much later than the others. By the time he wrote Christians, who like Jesus were often loyal Jews, were finding it difficult to continue to worship within the synagogues. A new fear was abroad, one that would divide Christian and Jew, us and them, leading to centuries of mistrust, violence and misrepresentation. John wrote at a time of crisis and his gospel reflects both the fear and the consequent tragedy. The doors were locked for fear of the Jews.

If there is one sure certainty we learn from history it is that times of crisis always generate fear and good solutions never come out of ‘them’ being to blame. When the world is being broken the new shape it will take is formed by how we handle our fear. As Justin Welby said on Easter Sunday, we need a ‘new normal’.

So what gives us ground for hope? It is those people who do not surrender to fear. Those who know we will lose but do not surrender, those who understand the cost of enduring, those who accept the

worth of loving and supporting and looking for small best hopes. Those who represent the best of us and who deserve better.

When this is over we need a new normal. As I have said before we cannot pick up where we left off. To make that possible we shall need a way to tackle fear. There will be reckoning. Mistakes have been made, both in long term strategy and in managing the crisis. People have had to make decisions in a rapidly changing situation and it is all too easy to criticise with the benefit of hindsight. We now know that this is unprecedented but not unpredicted. In 2015 Barack Obama spoke of a global respiratory pandemic of a coronavirus nature within the next five to ten years. His suggestion was that we invest in the equipment, people and infrastructure to be ready for it. When we see the daily graphs we know that neighbours with much lower losses have tested more and have five times as many intensive care beds. When this is over we could spend a lot of time and energy pinning the blame. That is a response driven by fear.

This is something we need to make a decision about today – that we shall not allow it to happen - because it will only take us back to the old normal. If we want a model how to shape a new normal then I suggest we learn from the example of South Africa, that after apartheid the work of the Trust and Reconciliation Commission enabled many fears to be dismantled. The warning there of course is that the ‘old normal’ can be very resilient and like a virus it can re-emerge if we allow it to.

There is no future in scoring points from the past. We are being broken, when we rebuild it has to look different. When Jesus met his friends gathered in fear behind locked doors he gave them a gift and an instruction. The gift was a new beginning, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” The instruction was also a warning, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

That is a choice we need to make now. There is much we could decide not to retain.