

Jeremiah 20.7-13  
Matthew 10.24-39  
21<sup>st</sup> June 2020

## Be Not Afraid

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You'll know if you've ever read Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, or seen the three epic films, that potential disaster always lay just around the corner. There is a moment when the brave Gimli was weighing up their chances and says: *Certainty of death, small chance of success – what are we waiting for?*

Gimli's courage is almost tangible in every scene. He is small in stature but big in heart and his confidence is infectious. With Gimli on your team things would always look brighter.

Matthew writes his gospel at a time when the early followers of Jesus needed words of hope.

These days there's a tendency to equate churches as places of peace and sanctuaries of serenity. I'm not sure Matthew would quite get that.

In his day becoming a follower of Jesus was a brave decision; it was a risky thing to do. Becoming a Christian challenged conventional ways and even broke up families. There was a certain cost to faith with both the Romans bearing down on you alongside your own countrymen and women excluding you.

So, Jesus sends out his disciples and doesn't sugar coat their task. Sharing the gospel and living like him would be a tough call.

In his more informal translation, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson, puts it this way: *Don't be intimidated. Don't be bluffed into silence by the threats of bullies. There's nothing they can do to your soul, your core being.*

This, I think, is what today's Gospel is all about. What is our *core being*? What beliefs and convictions go so deep within us that, come what may, we'll want to overcome any fear and hold onto them?

In today's reading from the Jewish Scriptures we heard Jeremiah have something of a rant. There were times when he felt God had duped him into impossibly difficult and challenging situations. Jeremiah never felt following God was easy.

Yet today we heard him balance that with the idea that there was a truth which he'd discovered, which constantly and irresistibly bubbled away deep within him. Because Jeremiah had discovered his *core being*, he could never walk away from God. The truth he knew about God gave him courage even when he was facing a hailstorm of criticism from his peers.

My first pastorate was in the Midland's town of Kettering. The civic coat of arms portrayed a free slave

with a broken chain as one of the heraldic supporters. That's because a son of the town, William Knibb served in Jamaica as a Baptist Minister. He was an abolitionist and the white slave owners of the island hated him so much they called him The Monster. On a visit back to Britain he addressed the Baptist Assembly with an impassioned plea to end the Slave Trade, dramatically shocking his audience as he concluded his sermon by throwing a pair of slave chains down upon the table.

Knibb, alongside fellow abolitionists William Wilberforce and John Newton, challenged the system and took criticism even from fellow Christians. But they had discovered their *core being* and so spoke up and made a difference.

The German Jesuit priest, Karl Rahner called it '*Venturesome Love*'. The sort of love for God and neighbour than doesn't stay behind closed doors but ventures out, takes risks and grounds faith in experience.

This is, I believe, the love that transforms fear into courage.

Free Church Christians don't have much of a tradition in saying Creeds. Yet, there are times when I've really appreciated that moment to publicly hear myself saying 'I believe...'

Whenever I go for meetings at Sarum College we inevitably attend Evensong at Salisbury Cathedral just

across The Green. During that service we stand, face East and look at the High Altar as we say The Apostles' Creed, beginning with those life changing and affirming words 'I believe...'

Perhaps, at AFC, we do that most when we sing our hymns as their words go deep into our hearts and help mould us into the people we are.

I love using Desmond Tutu's words as a sort of creedal statement: *Good is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death.*

I want to hear myself say them often and in their speaking disclose something of the core of my being.

So, Matthew seeks to encourage his readers, living in precarious times, to keep on trusting in God and living like Jesus.

We are told that God knows the number of hairs on our head – and for some that figure has gone up somewhat during Lockdown! That, when a sparrow falls to the ground, God knows.

Of course, this is the beautiful language of poetry, yet it distils a poignant truth that we hold dear. That God doesn't leave us alone on our pilgrimage through life but accompanies us.

I was so pleased that we were able to carry one of Lucy

Berry's poems on our website this week. Lucy broadcasts on Radio 2 and is a non-stipendiary URC minister and this is how her poem for Lockdown ended: *And God said: "Lean on me, lean on me. I AM here right now, so you can lean on me! I have been here all along, I will be the One who's strong, this is when you lean on me"*.

We are living in different days from Matthew's readers yet, I sense, many of us have experienced a certain amount of anxiety, confusion and worry over these last three months in particular.

Today we hear Jesus' words: *Be not afraid* as we affirm in our hearts once more that God does not leave us alone but accompanies us through life.

It is often in the struggles of life that learn the most. We discover hidden depths and lasting truths. An ancient theologian, Master Eckhart spoke of such moments as *The Birth of God in our Souls*, the process through which our faith is formed and fashioned.

I'm sure that's behind our gospel reading today. Jesus is preparing his disciples and in doing so he speaks words of honesty and encouragement.

Well, I thank God for the poets of our faith who do the same. People like Lucy Berry or Carolyn Gillette, whose verses we have published for this Father's Day.

Let's finish with Carolyn's words, they reflect Christ's

and his call to *Be not afraid...*

*O God, you seek to save us, no matter what the cost;  
Our Father, your intention is no one will be lost.  
As Jesus called you "Abba," and trusted in your plans,  
We trust in you to guide us! Our lives are in your hands.*

*You hold your children's future when all will be made new.  
Your house has many dwellings so we may live with you.  
Just like a loving father, you answer when we pray.  
In thanks, may we your children now follow you each day.*

May it be so, in the name of God, who is always  
accompanying us on the pilgrimage of faith and who  
whispers to us once more today to: *Be not afraid.* Amen