

‘DO NOT BE AFRAID’

Isaiah 9. 2-7
Titus 2. 11-14
Luke 2. 1-14

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Allow me to read you a few lines from the diary of a teenage girl which has now been read by people all over the world:

‘I’m currently in the middle of a depression. I couldn’t really tell you what set it off, but I think it stems from my cowardice, which confronts me at every turn. This evening, . . . , the doorbell rang long and loud. I instantly turned white; my stomach churned, and my heart beat wildly; (it was) all because I was *afraid*.’¹

These words are, of course, taken from the diary of Anne Frank, a Jewish girl who went into hiding with seven others in a secret annexe in an empty section of a warehouse in Amsterdam during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. Her diary, published after her death in a concentration camp, remains both challenging and thought-provoking.

‘I was afraid,’ writes Anne.

Most of us here will have experienced fear, and some of us (or members of our families) will even have experienced the fear that Anne Frank wrote about during the Second World War. Living in fear is debilitating; and since living in fear is often accompanied by poor sleep and constant watchfulness, living in fear can have a de-humanising effect.

¹ From the *Diary of Anne Frank*, ‘Letter to Kitty’ dated 8th November 1943.

The Holy Family must have experienced similar fear, given that they lived in a land that was occupied by a brutal military force. They also had numerous other fears to face: the difficult and dangerous journey to Bethlehem, with Mary heavily pregnant; confronting the crowds of people flocking to the City of David, with the realisation that there was nowhere for the Holy Family to stay; coming to terms with the imminence of our Lord's birth, far away from Mary's family in Nazareth; after the birth, dreading the terror of King Herod who slaughtered innocent children; and finally, the flight into Egypt as refugees and aliens.

The story of the Holy Family is the story of many human families, of which Anne Frank's family is simply one. The story of the Holy Family is the reality of the incarnation; and this is the reality of Christmas. The story of the incarnation is powerful, because it tells us that what we are celebrating at this Mass is real, and not some fairy tale. We have not gathered in this church to bask in the glow of Father Christmas or Good Saint Nick. Christmas celebrates God *breaking into our world* and the emptying of himself into his creation, thus experiencing all the things that make us afraid.

The prophecy of Isaiah that we heard a moment ago speaks of a people who walked in darkness and in the shadow of death, the shadow of enemy occupation and of foot-soldiers preparing for battle. But Isaiah prophesied that one day, a light would break into that darkness and that fear would be replaced with joy. This prophecy has come true in Jesus, born of Mary, the Son of God, the Word made flesh, Emmanuel, God with us; every one of Christ's titles points to *God in our midst*.

With God in our midst we need not fear. The story of the birth of our Lord and the events surrounding it are marked by the regular repetition of this phrase: 'Do not be afraid.'

When the Angel Gabriel met Zechariah, who was to be the father of John the Baptist, Zechariah was not just afraid, he was terrified; but the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah.’² When the angel Gabriel greeted Mary, she was troubled and perplexed; but the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid Mary.’³ When Joseph was desperate and planning to end his engagement to Mary who was pregnant outside of wedlock, an angel appeared in a dream and said ‘Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid.’⁴ And when the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds watching their flocks at night, they were terrified; but the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid.’⁵

The incarnation is about God removing fear from our lives: fear of sin; fear of failure; fear of oppression; fear of sickness; fear of death!

You all remember the story of the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden. In the book of Genesis, we read that God had planted a beautiful garden and placed in it the crown of his creation, a man and a woman named Adam and Eve; yet they disobeyed God’s simple rules and brought enmity where there had once been friendship. What was the result of the fall, of that story in Genesis? Not just sin and death, but *fear* which de-humanised Adam and Eve so much so that they became ashamed of their bodies, even though they were made in God’s image. They hid themselves. ‘I was afraid,’ said Adam to God.⁶

My friends, it is the fear of death, and not death itself that often debilitates us; or it is the fear of being found out; or the fear of being rejected; or the fear of being lonely that can make our lives so sad. Sometimes, such fear can consume us and de-humanise us. The wise men, rejoicing after they had seen our Lord, went to see King Herod; and the gospel tells us that he was frightened,⁷ and all of Jerusalem with him.

² Cf. Lk 1. 8-13.

³ Cf. Lk 1. 26-30.

⁴ Cf. Mt 1. 18-20.

⁵ Cf. Lk 2. 8-11.

⁶ Cf. Gen 3. 8-12.

⁷ Cf. Mt 2. 1-3.

From King Herod to Adolf Hitler, there have been people who through their own insecurity and fear have made others very afraid.

My friends, Christmas is about the *reversal of this primal fear*. Christmas is about *God breaking in*. 'Do not be afraid!' is the message that comes across loud and clear in the Christmas story. Jesus came in time and space and absorbed all the world's fear. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when he threw himself down on the ground to pray, he felt every human fear that had existed since the Fall and anticipated every fear that would come after his death and resurrection; yes, even yours and mine. So when he stretched out his arms on the hard wood of the cross, he embraced the world and its fears and brought redemptive love and forgiveness.

As Archbishop Rowan Williams once said, 'When God comes among us, he doesn't first of all clear humanity out of the way so that he can take over; he becomes a human being. He doesn't force his way in to dominate and crush; he announces his arrival in the sharp, hungry cry of a new-born baby. He changes the world not by law and threat, but by death and resurrection.'⁸

On the day of his resurrection, what did Christ say to Mary Magdalene and the other women? 'Do not be afraid!'⁹

My friends, Happy Christmas; do not be afraid!

Amen.

⁸ Sermon preached at Canterbury Cathedral, 25th December 2003.

⁹ Cf. Mt 28. 8-10.