

Jesus warns of tendencies to fear and complacency.

In our gospel passage today, Jesus addresses two tendencies which he foresees might have a negative impact on the life and mission of his disciples – including the group he's speaking to at the time - and also the group of disciples which gathers at St Luke's Modbury!

In the opening verses of our reading Jesus addresses a tendency to give in to fear - fear which can paralyse individual disciples and, if allowed take hold, can also immobilise the Christian communities to which they belong. In verses 32-34 of our reading Jesus tells his disciples:

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Luke 12.32-34)

Jesus is speaking to his disciples as a group – he addresses them as God's 'little flock'. The words are significant – they form an affirmation of the disciples, who were possibly facing hostility and rejection, because they knew from the Old Testament that to be part of God's flock is to be included in the people of God. They may be rejected by their contemporaries but they are affirmed by Jesus as part of God's flock, members of the people of God. The words also convey a sense of affection – the flock may be little but it's precious to God. And to this little flock, and to all the little flocks, ours included, for which, as the good shepherd, he will give his life, Jesus says. 'Do not be afraid.' A more literal translation would be 'Cease giving in to fear!'

Jesus knows the threats and possible threats which might be brought to bear on this little flock, and all little flocks. He knows also that disciples, then and now, can become fixated on their fears, and can exaggerate their fears, and that a culture of fear can infect Christian communities and inhibit the life and mission of those communities. The thing is, these Christian communities – whether those early disciples or local churches today – are the main means by which the good news of Jesus is to be shared, so it's vital that they're not immobilised by fear. Jesus commands them (and us) therefore to cease giving in to fear and he goes on to say why the disciples can cease being afraid. 'It has pleased the Father' he continues, 'to give you the kingdom.' Here, I think Jesus is using a kind of shorthand to speak of the blessings of God's kingdom - blessings which God longs for followers of Jesus to know in their lives. Faithful Jews listening to Jesus would have understood that in speaking of the kingdom Jesus was speaking of the blessings of salvation – the blessing of having God's presence renewed in their lives and in the life of their community, the blessing of God's peace or 'shalom' and the blessing of a life which would be undefeated by the grave. All this, and more, is wrapped up in that gift of the kingdom, all this, Jesus tells his disciples, the Father has already decided to give and is pleased to give – it is available to all to will accept it by trusting and following Jesus.

In the New Testament the salvation that God offers to us in Christ is often described in terms of freedom or liberation. In fact, that's the third most common way salvation is described – we are 'set free in Christ', we're 'set free from bondage to sin and death', we are 'no longer slaves but free', we are set free from our own selfishness - and we are set free from fear.

In our passage this freedom from fear that disciples can find in following Jesus is symbolised by a new generosity. God has generously and freely given us the

Kingdom – and we, in turn, are set free from our selfishness and insecurity to give generously and freely to others, especially those in need. We are no longer possessed by our possessions, we can sell our possessions and give to the poor – not all our possessions you'll note, we have to live, but we sit loose on them. Instead of drawing security from our possessions (including, dare one say, bank accounts and superannuation funds), Jesus tells us we should concentrate on investing in treasure in heaven – where it can't be diminished by stock market losses and where no scammers can hack in to steal. Phillip Henry, an Anglican minister in rural England in the 17th Century was known and sometimes ridiculed for setting aside a good part of his income to provide for the poor. He would answer his critics, *'He is no fool who parts with that which he cannot keep, when he is sure to gain that which he cannot lose.'*

Jesus sums up this section of teaching with the words, 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also'. These are actually tough words, because Jesus is telling us that the truth is that we invest our time and gifts in that which we see as valuable, so if we want to find where our heart is, we just need to do a survey of how we use the time and gifts and money God has granted to us. I don't know about you but I find that quite challenging – but it's not a challenge I think we can avoid, if we are to count ourselves as faithful disciples.

In the second part of our reading, we find Jesus telling his disciples:

³⁵ *"Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶ be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. ³⁷ Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. ³⁸ If he comes during the middle of the night or near dawn and finds them so, blessed are those slaves."*

And then he continues:

³⁹ “But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he^[a] would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰ You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

‘Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit’ is rather weak translation. The original says, literally, ‘Gird your loins for action!’ Then, as now, in the middle east people wore long flowing robes for comfort in the heat, but if you have to work or fight, long flowing robes just get in the way. The solution was to hitch your robes up around your thighs so that you could move and work freely. Girded loins were work clothes and battledress – and that, Jesus tells us must be the mindset that disciples then and now must maintain. The thing is, girded loins and workclothes and battledress are not all that comfortable and, if they think there’s not much happening, if God seems far away, most disciples, us included I suspect, have a tendency to become complacent and somewhat lethargic, and this has a corresponding negative impact on the life and mission of Christian communities. Jesus foresaw this possibility – he knew that the time would come, after his ascension, when he would no longer be physically present with his followers, and he knew that during this time his disciples might grow complacent. But he also promised he would return. Here and in other places he emphasises that his return is certain, but its timing will be unknown to us. In the parable which forms a large part of our reading Jesus portrays himself as the Master returning to his home from a wedding banquet and he hints that this return may be delayed – the Master may not return until the middle of the night or near dawn, but no matter what the delay, the servants who are blessed are those who are awake and ready to open the door to him.

In the final parable Jesus suggests that his return will be at, as he puts it, 'an unexpected hour' - it will come like a thief in the night. Again, the emphasis, both for individuals and churches, is on being ready, and being found faithful on the day of the Lord's return.

Let me sum up. In our gospel passage today, Jesus warns of two tendencies which he foresees might have a negative impact on the life and mission of both the community of disciples he's speaking to at the time, and also on churches in the future.

Firstly, there's the tendency to give in to fears which can paralyse individual disciples and, if allowed take hold, can also immobilise the Christian communities to which they belong. I wonder to what extent you think this tendency is affecting your life and ministry, and the ministry, and future of our church? Launching his 'New Deal' in the midst of the Great Depression, Franklin Delaney Roosevelt told the American people, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself". In the light of the kingdom blessings God has been pleased to give us in the Lord Jesus Christ, maybe we also need to hear that message?

The second tendency - which I said might be seen as almost opposite to the first - is a tendency to complacency - a complacency that leads to spiritual lethargy in the life and mission of individuals and church communities. I think this is a constant danger. All of us, me included, like to stay in our comfort zone - and churches are like that too. We say we want change, but we don't want to change anything, we're too comfortable with the way things are. One of the tasks of leadership is to confront complacency, so we need to thank Jo when she does that, even though we might feel irritated at the time! Each of us individually is also called to be part of a church culture that challenges complacency. The writer to the Hebrews calls on

individual Christians, 'To consider how you might spur one another on toward love and good deeds.' (Hebrews 10.24) Have you done any spurring on lately?

The thrust of the parables in the second part of our reading is that complacency and lethargy just won't cut it. On the other hand, as the great evangelist David Watson used to say, 'For those who are ready, Jesus will not come as a thief in the night but as a friend in the day'.