



Facing fear in our lives

An address for the Cosmic Mass ● 17th August 2008 ● Rev Craig

And he said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a cubit to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass which is alive in the field today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O men of little faith! And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be of anxious mind. For all the nations of the world seek these things; and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things shall be yours as well. "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Luke 12:22-32

I was somewhat taken aback to learn recently that there is a recognized phobia known as homilophobia, which is a fear of sermons. At first I thought this was a joke, but have read that this condition is defined as "a *persistent, abnormal, and unwarranted fear of sermons.*" Symptoms typically include shortness of breath, rapid breathing, irregular heartbeat, sweating, nausea, and overall feelings of dread.

I hope none of you have an overwhelming sense of dread, or are feeling short of breath. If so, I promise to not waffle on too much.

In Matthew, chapter 10: 29-31 we read of Jesus saying,

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."

Christ spoke to us about the fears that people had every day, which is as true today as it was 2,000 years ago. It is not common to hear people speaking of fear; more often we speak or hear of worry. We all worry about many things and in hindsight we sometimes realise that the concerns were not as great as they appeared to be at the time.

Where there is worry, I suggest there is probably also fear. Many may reject this notion and not accept that they are ever fearful, and yet stress is so common and the underlying cause of stress is often fear. We constantly hear of people suffering from stress-related illnesses.

The reality is that we tend to worry about the wrong things. Jesus Christ told us not to worry about our lives and yet we do. How can we possibly stop worrying? Many of us are worried about money, health, relationships and numerous other everyday issues and it is difficult not to succumb. Worry and fear solve nothing and in fact only add to our burdens. Birds and animals do not have assets or property and look how they are cared for by God. How much

more important to him are you? "*You are of more value than many sparrows*", he tells us. In Luke 12:32 we read "*Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*" It is easy to say not to worry but when faced with a dilemma for most of us this is the natural tendency.

It is said that the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear. I stand to be corrected, but my understanding is that psychologists and psychiatrists classify specific fears as phobias.

It is amazing to realise that there are literally hundreds of phobias, some of which I found at website named www.phobialist.com. These lists included fears such as ecclesiophobia, which is fear of churches and there is even a hierophobia which is a fear of priests.

Amusing as they may seem, phobias are fears that are not funny to those suffering. To have a phobia means much more than a dislike. Some fears can dramatically interfere with daily life. One of the books I am reading is Henning Mankell's book *Chronicle of the Wind*, and I read something which rings true, which is, "If you're afraid, it's like you're suffering from an insatiable hunger, but if you're anxious, you can fight off your anxiety."

Just as Abraham believed God's promise that he would have a son in his old age, we should have faith that God is watching over us. If we could only fully accept this then we would not worry and be afraid of anything we face in this life. We could then endure the hardships of this world because the kingdom of heaven has been opened to us. When I reflect on this I cannot help but confront myself and have some appreciation of my inadequacies in the worries that I harbour.

Living in fear is a terrible way to live and yet this is how so many live their lives - in constant fear, living with insecurities and anxieties. Some of our fears are of our own creation and only exist in our minds, but of course there are some real fears in this world. We live in a world that really is, at times and in some places, incredibly scary, and we live in a world where fear is used to keep us from engaging in healing ways with people who are different. We live in a world where fear is used to teach hatred and intolerance. We live in a world where we are taught that courage means meeting violence with violence, and where bullies are held up as role models. What a difference it would make if we, as individuals and as communities, could release our fear and learn instead to trust and love.

"Fear can always stop us dead in our tracks, for it has become the 'emotional plague' of our planet,"
observed French philosopher Patrick Viveret.

I recently spent some time in Middle East and witnessed people living in real fear of some dreadful and imminent conflict or terrorist attack. Imagine landing at Melbourne airport and seeing anti-aircraft guns and tanks as the aircraft taxis towards the terminal, well that is what it is like in Jeddah. Most Westerners in Saudi Arabia live in compounds guarded by security forces and soldiers with tanks and machine guns, surrounded by high walls topped with razor wire, and all road approaches to such compounds have complex chicanes to restrict possible terrorist attacks. These are not irrational fears, they are very real. In Dubai it was pointed out to me by one local that Iran is only 80 kilometres across the Gulf and they live in fear of what may happen as many believe the regime to be irrational. Test missiles were being launched by Iran when I was last there which, although reported in Australia, hardly caused a ripple, while in the Middle East there was grave fear in the minds of most people. I can hardly imagine what it must be like for the people of Iraq. They must surely live in constant fear.

We are so fortunate to live in this wonderful country. The experience of travelling and mixing with other cultures makes us appreciate just how incredibly fortunate we are.

Some people are fearful of failure, while others fear success. Some fear being controlled while others fear having too much freedom. Many fears are not rational, but very real to those that have such fears. Fear can be a powerful force that can paralyse us. Fear can keep us from being all that God created us to be.

It is likely that many of our fears would disappear if we knew that we were loved, accepted and secure. Well, the fact is that we are all loved even if we do not fully appreciate it. So why do we fear such things as failure, rejection or even success. Is it possible because there may be a great insecurity within our souls? Imagine how much we could accomplish if we could be relieved of all our fears and anxieties, which is possible, if we truly believed that God was with us.

In the second letter of Timothy it is written

"For God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of love, power and a sound mind"
2 Timothy 1:7

During the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt said,

"Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself - nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyses needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."

His wife Eleanor said of fear,

"The danger lies in refusing to face the fear...Courage is more exhilarating than fear and in the long run it is easier."

The message is clear - if you fear something then face it. One suggestion as to how to overcome fear is to beat it into submission with our own ability to act.

Fear leads men to do terrible things. It is probable that fear was the reason that motivated the Sanhedrin and those in power at the time to crucify of Jesus Christ. They felt threatened by him and so they destroyed him, or so they thought, but instead released a omnipotent loving power that has become the essence of our being.

Jesus said,

"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid"
John 14:27

Christ taught us to not be afraid, that God cares for the smallest sparrow falling from the sky. His message is that God cares for each one of us!

These words will be very familiar to most of you.....

*Why should I feel discouraged, why should the shadows come,
Why should my heart be lonely, and long for heaven and home,
When Jesus is my portion? My constant friend is he:
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me;*

*Let not your heart be troubled, his tender word I hear,
And resting on his goodness, I lose my doubts and fears;
Though by the path he leadeth, but one step I may see;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.*

*Whenever I am tempted, whenever clouds arise,
When songs give place to sighing, when hope within me dies,
I draw the closer to him, from care he sets me free;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.*

Worry is one of fear's offspring and it can be extremely destructive to the spirit, as it keeps us from living in the moment and trusting that all will be well. It has been said that "*Worry is a misuse of the imagination,*" and is also "*praying for what you don't want.*"

I have not given up my worries, but I know that the more I can understand the deep place in me from where they have sprung, the less control they have over me. My aim is to worry less, to trust more and my spirit should be the stronger because of it.

I know it is not something easily done. I do not think that our fears and worries will go away just because we wish them to. I know of the toll that fear can take on a person and the strength that is required to face fear and release it. I recognise at times the power that fear can have on an individual, and has over me, and the effort required to let it go. Fear can grip like a demon.

But, like the poet Joy Harjo, I find hope in the act of releasing my fear and in the knowledge that even I can be brave. "*I am not afraid to be hated,*" she writes, "*and I am not afraid to be loved.*" And I would add, I am not afraid to live, fully and lovingly, even in this world that we are taught is such a dangerous place.

Francis Moore Lappe wrote of fear as being a pure energy that we can deal with. She wrote that this possibility and the momentous consequences of this shift awakened for her one night in Nairobi in Kenya when she and her daughter met the Rev Timothy Njoya, who had done something which until that evening she believed no human being could do. I also found this story of courage extraordinary and wanted to share it with you.

For preaching a pro-democracy message despite the repeated threats against him by a dictatorial government, seven armed assailants appeared one night at his door. Despite all he had been through, Rev Njoya—a slight and agile man—playfully acted out what happened next. As he described his fingers being sliced off, his belly being slashed open, he was chuckling!

Then he told her that, as he lay on the floor and certain he was dying, he began to give his treasures away to his attackers—to one his favourite Bible, to another his library, and so on.

What!? She thought to herself. *How can this be? How could anyone not respond with sheer terror and life-preserving aggression to such brutality?*

So she asked him, "But Rev Njoya, why were you not totally overcome by fear?"

Sitting deep in the cushioned armchair, his sweet face framed by a stiff white priest's collar, Rev Njoya paused for only a moment. Then he said, "Fear is an energy that comes from inside us, not outside. It's neutral. So we can channel it into fear, paranoia, or euphoria, whatever we choose." He rose out of his chair. "Imagine a lion," he said, crouching. "When a lion sees prey or predator, it senses fear first. But instead of lunging blindly in defence or in attack, it recoils." Reverend Njoya moved back, leaning on his left leg and crouching lower. "The lion pauses a moment, targets his energies. Then he springs.

"We can do the same. We can harness our would-be fears, harmonize our energies, and channel them into courage." His whole body, his whole life, seemed to tell her, yes, this is possible. Rev. Njoya's response—that of generosity in the face of brutality—so moved his assailants that it was they who rushed him to the hospital where doctors saved him.

Fear is the biggest block to love. Fear can be a prison, keeping us from having the trust to reach out to others. Fear can hold us back, as individuals, from being fully who we are. John wrote that,

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love, because he first loved us"

1 John 4: 18-19

John makes it clear that love is the antidote to fear. Courage is fear that has said its prayers. We are aware that our prayers are multiplied when we sing, and what a lovely prayer we sing so often in "*O love that knoweth of no fear*", which was the my inspiration in preparing this address.

In Mark 5:36 Jesus Christ delivered a four word sermon, "*Do not fear, only believe.*"

In conclusion, I quote Wayne Arnason who wrote these words,

"Take courage friends. The way is often hard, the path is never clear, and the stakes are very high. Take courage. For deep down, there is another truth: you are not alone."

So shall it be.

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