

All our fears

Introduction

Quiz shows and Family Fortunes.

The question we had to answer today was all about our fears. Fear is essential to the human condition. Fear shows us our limits and protects us. It is a feeling we can all understand, that we all experience.

So to our gospel reading today. A story of two trials. In Mark we jump from one story to another, like the psychological thrillers we see on TV; following the parallel journeys of numerous characters. In one thread we have the story of Jesus, of his trial before the Jewish leaders; and on the other Peter who's trial is altogether different. A reading of trials but also a reading of fears.

So let us start with Peter. It is significant that Mark has told us previously that when Jesus was arrested in the Garden, all his disciples deserted him and fled. But that is not strictly true. One of them didn't run away and that person was Peter. And before we consider Peter's trial and his denials, I want us to acknowledge that positive action. Peter didn't simply run away; he followed Jesus into the place of danger; into the very courtyard of the High Priest's house. For sure, Peter was frightened; he was also exhausted, as sunrise is fast approaching. He had been up all night. He was also cold, and he sought the warmth of a fire. The light of the flames illuminated his face. Peter is faithful; he was the leader, the spokesman, the closest friend. He was the man of insight – he alone spoke up when Jesus asked his disciples 'Who do you say that I am?' He was a man whom Jesus pronounced as blest; he was given a new name, Cephas, Petros, the rock.

Yet even Peter, friend to Christ, first amongst his disciples slips up. It only took a servant-girl, on seeing his face in the glow of the fire. And she didn't even accuse him of very much – she only suggested that he had been with Jesus. Peter could simply have ignored her. But Peter answered her and denied being with Jesus. He then withdrew – Peter who was following, now begins to withdraw; he goes back to the forecourt; ominously a cock crows. The girl, perhaps pursuing him, knowing she has rattled him, now addresses the bystanders around – the rumour spread - 'This man is one of them' – but again Peter denied it. Then the bystanders, the crowd, the potential mob, turns on him – they had heard his northern accent – certain Peter was one of them. And Peter snaps, and this time he curses and even more chillingly, he swears an

oath: 'I do not know the man you are talking about'. We are not sure whether Peter cursed himself or even cursed 'the man', Jesus himself; whether he swore an oath on himself or even on Jesus – but while the words were still on his lips, the cock crowed again, and Peter remembered.

At the moment the cock crows Peter has the realisation. He remembers the words of Jesus, his warning of Peter's denials. Perhaps he thinks back to his words to Jesus when he confidently stated even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you. In the gospel of Luke it is at this moment that he sees Jesus. Jesus looks right at him. How must he have felt? In his fear he has done exactly what he said he would never do.

In contrast there is the trial of Jesus. In his trial he shows extreme courage. When every temptation must have been to defend himself he remains silent. As the witnesses lie and twist his words he keeps his own council. And when asked a question. A question that when answered he knows will condemn him he does not hesitate. Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One he is asked. His answer is straight to the point. 'I am,' he says 'and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.' With one sentence he seals his fate as he knew he must. As Peter falters Christ does not. We have talked about the fear of Peter but what about the fear of Christ?

There is a quote, attributed to the US President Franklin D Roosevelt and it says this. Courage is not the absence of fear. For Jesus, although fully God was also fully human. Hebrews tells us that he is able to empathise with our weaknesses. Jesus was a human who felt every emotion that we do. We see his anguish in the garden of Gethsemane. Luke tells us of the tears, like blood, falling to the ground. A sign of extreme stress and anxiety. A sign of fear.

But there is more to the quote that I just gave you from Roosevelt. This is how it ends. Courage is not the absence of fear but rather the assessment that something else is more important. Jesus knows what is about to happen. He knows that he is about to suffer. That the pain will be unimaginable but he also knows the why. That his sacrifice on the cross will save us all.

Fear is not a sin. Peter's error is not in his fear but in giving in to it, giving in to the temptation. Fear keeps us safe but it can also stop us becoming who we are meant to be. This can be true even for those common fears we guessed earlier. A fear of flying may stop us visiting places we would love to or even

visiting our friends; a fear of heights or water might deprive us of the experience of a lifetime. Experiences that shape us as people. The command God gives us to not be afraid is given in the knowledge that we will be. It is an encouragement to fix our eyes on what we can't see rather than the trial in front of us. Jesus does this and Peter does not.

And in the garden, Jesus explains and shows how we do this. He tells the disciples to get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. And in his fear and anguish he talks to his father. He lays it as God's feet and simply states, '**what you will.**' He acknowledges his human frailty but that with God anything is possible. The disciples meanwhile sleep. Their spirit is willing but their flesh is weak.

Ultimately Peter makes a mistake. This is a lesson for Peter, a necessary step to become who he needs to become. In his trial he understands his weakness and his fears. His confidence in himself, shown in his promise to never disown Christ, may be shaken but his understanding grows. We learn the most about ourselves in times of trials and fear, when we make mistakes. Look who Peter becomes. He becomes a leader, when he turns back as Jesus foresees he is able to strengthen his brothers.

Here is the final question for you all today. How well do we know ourselves? I want us to take some time to think about that. Are we honest with ourselves about our weaknesses and do we take those weaknesses to God. Jesus knows Peter better than Peter knows himself and that is true for us too. He knows Peter will make a mistake, be overcome with fear. Peter's trial makes him more self aware. Aware of his fears, aware of his weaknesses, and aware of his vulnerabilities. But also gives him the awareness of the steps he needs to take to become who he is meant to be.

We started by talking about common fears. The fears that affect many of us. My greatest fear is this. The fear of failure, of falling short, the fear of letting down those I love including Christ. The funny thing about this fear is that I know it will happen. Jesus calls us to have courage and he calls us to be present but the example of Peter shows that we will fall short. Only Jesus is perfect, only Jesus is without sin. So what do we do when we fall short? When fear overcomes us. We need to be kind to ourselves but also learn from the experience. Life is a journey and our journey of discipleship is one that hopefully makes us more like Christ. So follow his example. Acknowledge your

frailties and fears both to yourself and God, and know that with him everything is possible.