

## **WHY ARE YOU AFRAID? Mark 4.40**

*Yes, I know I've been a fisherman all my life, but I still don't like it when a storm makes me feel I'm about to be thrown to the fishes.*

*It started out like any other day, Jesus teaching the crowds that seem to pop up out of nowhere whenever he appeared. By late afternoon he was clearly exhausted. It hadn't helped that he'd been up half the night with a couple who'd lost their son in an accident. He always made time for people. But now his face was lined with weariness, just like our Dad's face when we've hardly caught anything for weeks.*

*We needed to get away. Even Jesus recognised this and it was he who suggested we go over to the other side of the lake for a bit. It was Gentile territory over there on the eastern shore and they weren't as aware of all that Jesus was doing on that side of the lake. Everyone thought it was a good idea. We were all tired from the heat, and doing our best to protect Jesus – from himself as much as the crowds. So we set off in the late afternoon sun, pulling gently on the oars, a light breeze in the sails. Jesus immediately sank into the cushions in the stern and fell asleep.*

*If only it had stayed that way, nice and calm, as we relaxed after the strain of the day.*

*At first it was just a squall. We weren't alarmed - we get those on the lake. But soon enough the wind had got up and the waves were growing bigger by the minute. Before we knew it we'd got a full-scale storm. Waves were swamping the boat and it was being tossed around like a leaf in a waterfall. We were hanging on to anything that looked like it wouldn't break apart. I looked at my friends, most of us experienced sailors, and we were all looking tense. Verging on panic. We knew this lake and it could be vicious.*

*I think it was James who said what we were all thinking. He shouted over the roar of the storm. I couldn't really hear him but I could see what he meant; we must wake Jesus.*

*I was nearest. I gave his shoulder a little shake. Nothing. He was dog-tired. I shook it a little harder. He opened an eye. 'Is there a problem?' he mouthed, the words lost in the howling wind.*

*Is there a problem! For heaven's sake. Is Pontius Pilate a Roman tyrant! Of course there was a problem! Like we were about to drown. Another deluge of water crashed into me, momentarily taking my breath away. I managed to gasp out my complaint, 'Look, Jesus, we're drowning. Don't you care?' I admit I was a bit sharp.*

*Jesus sat up, holding on to the side of the boat. He looked around, looked at us, and smiled. Smiled! Jesus' timing isn't always great. (Or perhaps it is.) Anyway, he looked across the angry water, and then up at the dark sky with the clouds driving past furiously, and he said, firmly and clearly, to everything around us, 'Peace! Quieten down. Be still.'*

*This is where it gets seriously weird. Immediately, and I mean immediately, I felt calm inside. It was all right. I knew it. And a few moments later I was sure the wind was dropping a bit. Three or four minutes later and the storm was clearly dying away. How did he do that? Did he do that? It was extraordinary. Gingerly, we stood up and shook ourselves down.*

*Jesus looked at the relief on our faces. He grinned. 'Why are you afraid?' he asked. As if it wasn't obvious.*

*I love it when he grins. All his attractive personality is packed into that grin. People get so excited about his teaching and healing and so on, and they often forget what good company he is. He's wise, kind, thoughtful, clear-thinking and so on, but he's also great fun. Sometimes, at our evening mealtimes, we laugh until we ache. He's a great story-teller of course, but more than that, he kind of shines with life - if you know what I mean - and we get caught up in it. We're spell-bound.*

*'Why are you afraid?' He asked that seemingly innocent question with a mischievous grin. But it seemed to me there was a deeper question lurking behind it. As so often. He seemed to be saying, 'Believe me, you really are safe with me. Maybe not physically, but in all the ways that truly matter.' He seemed to be asking a question but really it was an invitation, an invitation to trust him very deeply.*

*I do trust him – or try to. I feel much safer when I'm near him. Maybe I've got a lot more to learn about trust - it's early days - but I've never felt so secure with anyone else, even with our parents when I was a boy. Like I felt on the water just then. Immediately he spoke I felt calm. It was all right. I knew it. Deep down, everything was all right.*

*'Why are you afraid?' he asked.*

*Yes, why did I need to be afraid with a friend like that?*

+++++

There are two occasions in my life when for some reason I've allowed myself to be convinced that walking on burning coals was a good idea. The fact that there were two hours of motivational training beforehand didn't entirely eliminate the trepidation or prevent me noticing there was an ambulance in waiting. I'm still here to tell the story, and could even let you know the physics of why it can be safe to walk on coals burning at just under 1000 degrees Fahrenheit (540 degrees Centigrade). But I'm not recommending it to a person of a nervous disposition.

There are some situations where fear is entirely reasonable. Walking on burning coals is one. Being caught in a small boat in a violent storm is another. I'm not sure hanging by your fingernails off a 3000 ft vertical rock face in Yosemite is good for one's nerves either (see the film *Free Solo (1)*). In the Covid 19 pandemic millions of people were legitimately afraid of leaving home, particularly if they were older, had underlying health conditions, and were male. (For the record, that was me.)

There are, perhaps, two stages to go through when facing our fears in situations like these. The first is to check that the fear we feel is actually well founded in the facts. That doesn't

mean the fear is illegitimate, because 'fear is fear' for the person experiencing it. But we might be able to relativize the intensity of the fear by calling it out.

There's a fable about a demon deciding to distract a man hurrying along a road. The demon roared and screamed and vomited but the man simply raised his hat and walked by. It then tried appearing as a huge snake spitting venom and blocking the road. The man hit it with a stick and carried on. In desperation the demon then appeared as a psychopathic murderer waving an axe and breathing obscenities, but the man just smiled and waved back. The demon was astonished and fell in beside the man. 'Tell me, traveller,' it said, 'why are you not afraid?' 'Oh, but I am,' said the man. 'I'm afraid that if my mind keeps producing this sort of rubbish I won't reach my destination before sundown.' (2)

Some fear can be laid to rest by examining the facts – such as my experience with burning coals, and, for a long time, going to the dentist. It's then possible we can be lured down from the ledge of imminent disaster which we've prematurely occupied. Our fears might be at least partially allayed.

There is, however, a more important stage in facing our fears. This is when the fear is not just entirely reasonable but pretty well inevitable. Any normal person would feel the same. It could be the fear of imminent death, when the results of the tests have been explained by the consultant. It could be the fear of someone who's found themselves cut off by forest fires or who's taken a wrong turn and got lost on a desert hike. It could be the fear of parents rushing their small child to hospital with suspected meningitis.

A simple aphorism is 'don't be afraid of being afraid.' Let it be.

But Jesus seems to be offering something more. It was completely legitimate for the disciples to feel afraid as they were thrown about by the storm. In an argument, the sea nearly always has the last word. But in this case the last word was with Jesus. The word was 'Peace.' And it was spoken both to the storm and to the disciples.

Jesus took his friends to a place beyond fear. It was a place of deep safety. And it was based on being with Jesus.

This is the place that we can potentially find when the situation is dire, but faith enters the picture. It's the confidence that comes with 'letting go' into Christ. It means facing the fear, in all its stark reality, looking at it, understanding it - and then going through it. It's like passing through the waterfall, with all its cold ferocity, and finding ourselves in that place behind the waterfall where all is calm and the water can't reach us. This is where we know that nothing 'will be able to separate us from the love of God [that we find] in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (Romans 8.39). In an ultimate sense, we are safe.

It's the place of greater safety.

Martin Luther King was a young black pastor and he had just got out of jail when he received a death threat on the phone. 'Nigger, if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out, and blow up your house.' He sat in the kitchen and thought of his loyal wife and newborn daughter asleep upstairs. 'I bowed down over that cup of coffee.

I prayed a prayer that night. I said, 'Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think that the cause we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering.'

He was understandably afraid, exposed in a small boat on a wild sea.

But he went on, 'It seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And I will be with you, to the end of the world." I heard the voice of Jesus say still to fight on. He promised never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.' Three nights later a bomb exploded on the front porch, filling the house with smoke and broken glass, although no-one was injured. But King was ready now. He wasn't turning back. (3)

Martin Luther King had entered that place of greater safety. At one level, of course he was afraid; he had every reason to be. But underneath, he had found a peace that couldn't be shaken. The surface of the water might be disturbed violently, but six feet under the waves it was another story.

Finding our way to this place doesn't happen automatically. It may only come with tears and struggle. It's realistic, not magic. But when the breakthrough is made, there's a calm, a 'peace which surpasses all understanding.' (Philippians 4.7) I've seen it in people facing death and people facing dangerous operations. I've seen and heard it on the news in hostages facing immense danger, and in missionaries going into highly dangerous situations. These are not a different breed of people; they're ordinary people who have found their way to an extraordinary place.

Jesus knew what it was to be afraid. In Gethsemane we read that his fear was so deep that his sweat looked like drops of blood as he agonised with God over what the next day would bring. But he found his way through it, and from then on he never looked back. That's what I mean by a place of greater safety.

'Why are you afraid?' asked Jesus.

He had a better place to offer.

*To ponder:*

- *I wonder what you're afraid of?*
- *I wonder if, on some occasion, you've found that place of greater safety?*
- *I wonder what we can do deliberately to find that place?*
- *I wonder who you've admired who's faced their fears and found a deeper peace?*