

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

## Do Not Fear

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**  
**Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> September 2011**

Psalm 123

Matthew 10:24-33

The Bible is full of instructions to us telling us what we should and shouldn't do. At least, that's the commonest perception of the Bible. Actually it is full of a lot more than that. But just going with that perception, do you know which is by far the commonest instruction or command in the Bible? Is it to behave yourself? To say your prayers? To come and worship? No, it's none of these. It is one which we heard Jesus say three times in today's reading: Do not fear.

Fear not! This seems to be the angels' catch phrase. They rarely appear to anyone in Biblical stories without their opening line being "Fear not", which just goes to show that they are something out of the ordinary, which might startle people who aren't expecting them. But it is also what God's servants are told when they are being commissioned to go and do God's work.

Joshua is told not to fear as he takes over from Moses and sets out to lead the people into the Promised land.

Gideon is told not to fear when he is chosen, a weak and unnoticed man, to be leader of his people against the Midianites.

Jeremiah is told not to be afraid when he embarks upon the chancy life of a prophet with an unpopular message to bring.

Mary is told not to fear when she is told that she is to be the mother of God.

When Paul came to Corinth, and knew opposition, God told him not to be afraid but to preach with boldness, because God had many people in that city.

Do not fear. Sometimes the command is given in general circumstance: God's people are not those who should live afraid, because we know that God is with us no matter what. But often, as here in Jesus' instructions, the command not to fear is given in the context of ministry and mission. The particular thing which Jesus knew might cause fear among his followers was, and is, the fear of being misunderstood.

All through Christian history the gospel has been misunderstood. The Romans misunderstood what the first Christians said about the crucifixion and about the Eucharistic meal, so they put about stories that Christians were cannibals. The misunderstanding and misinformation has gone on from there: with the rumours often drawn from the behaviour of Christians rather than from the works and words of Jesus.

But Jesus knew that the world was never going to understand what his followers were up to, because he himself was grievously misunderstood. If his own people looked at him doing good and healing, but also demanding a radical commitment to God and living for others, and then decided that this was the work of Beelzebul - which was the worst insult they could come up with - then they were not going to change their tune and suddenly welcome a pack of followers going about spreading the message. Jesus knew that his first disciples and any true followers from then on would be very liable to be misunderstood and maligned.

So Jesus needs his disciples to know what they are letting themselves in for. It's as well to make up your mind not to fear at the outset. If you know what sort of thing to expect, then you will know

how to cope better. And when he tells them not to fear he gives us what at first sight is a very strange reason for fearlessness: Do not fear them, he says, *because* everything hidden will be revealed. What is covered up will be uncovered. Does this idea give you confidence? Does it fill you with delight? Everything will be made clear, made known.

It's for good reason that journalists hacking into mobile phone accounts was and continues to be such a scandal, especially when it was done to people who were going through what many of us felt should be private times of grief and agony. Few people like to think that their private words are going to be made public. That is why the use of CCTV cameras which is so widespread nowadays is also so controversial. We may be doing nothing remarkable, nothing to be ashamed of, but we do like to think that what we do and where we go in our own business. That is why I don't want to carry a Boots or Tesco card: what I buy in their stores is no one's business but mine - even if there is nothing startling in my shopping (and there's not)! Everything hidden being revealed? For many people the idea of what is private and hidden being shown to the world would be a matter for concern. We all have our secrets, delightful or shameful, and there are things which we would rather that no one knows. How can this be a reassurance?

But in the context of being misunderstood and maligned, 'Everything hidden being revealed' *is* cheering news. Jesus assumes, you see, that his disciples will be doing the things that he has been telling them. They - we - will be proclaiming the message that God's Kingdom has come near with our lips, and showing what that means in terms of bringing wholeness and life and freedom with our lives. We will be living the life of God's Kingdom, living with integrity. And that is why we need not fear and can welcome the idea of the hidden and the secret being made plain. Our integrity will in the end be justified.

However, with all these reasons not to fear, there is one thing which Jesus tells us we *are* to fear. We are not to fear those who misunderstand and accuse us. The worst they can do is kill us, and it is only our bodies that they can kill. But we *should* fear what can kill our spirits, our souls. We should fear anything and anyone which can destroy the integrity with which we live, which can make us react in ways which are contrary to the gospel message of love, because losing our integrity is death to our essential selves as disciples.

We saw last week that if we are wise as serpents without being innocent as doves, then we may well become ends-justifies-the-means merchants. If we fear those who could kill us; if we react to the forces of evil, to the ways of the world, to the hurtful confusion of the people on their own terms, then we have lost the battle. If we meet attack with attack, violence of body or of speech with violence, hatred with hatred, then we have left doing things in God's way and have adopted the ways of the world. Then we will lose even our own souls.

My last parish was a place which had had a colourful history at times. In the seventeenth century it had been a place where there was fear of witchcraft and where the church had actively pursued several people with accusations of witchcraft and treated them in the barbarous ways that these things were then handled. A few years ago, a local woman wrote a book about the witch trials in that part of the border-lands, in which she was critical of the church. Well, I too would feel that I should like to criticise our forefathers in that respect. However the local press picked up on the book and some things were written which made it sound as though the modern church would wholeheartedly agree with the with burnings, and might even like to try it again (which was ridiculous).

Some of the Christians were quite hurt by this. However we did not react. No one wrote to the papers "to put the record straight", which is often one of the best ways of perpetuating a lie, and keeping a story going. But some of us did get to know the author better. And we invited her to church events - social events. And before I left she was worshipping with us fairly regularly. Her beef with the witch trials was that this was not how the church of a God of love should behave. Her discovery was that this was not how the church of the God of love *did* behave towards her.

The church has not always remained true to its calling, and lived out the message that we preach. When we do not, we lose our integrity, we lose what we say we stand for, we lose our souls - and we lose the chance to be God's instrument in saving other souls as well. It is not easy to ignore the insults and the misinformation. It is not easy to go on showing love for the people who put about false rumours. But when we do, it is noticed. When the man who had started some nasty rumours that the minister threatened the nursery children with hell for them and their parents later ended up spending a weekend in a police cell (for a different matter entirely) he asked if the police would call for his minister to visit him - because he had not received the reaction he had expected from the person he had tried to hurt. Fear those who would drag us down to their level. Fear such evil, enough to be aware of it and resist it.

If we are Christians we are not called to blend in with the world. We are called to be better. We are called to acknowledge God with our lips and with our lives, to raise our eyes to him, like a servant to his master or a maid to her lady's hand, and live in glad obedience to his ways. And if we do this, relying on God's help, relying on the forgiveness of Christ when we honestly fail, then the great reward is that Jesus himself will acknowledge us, name us as his, before his Father

It is not God who destroys both body and soul in hell - literally Gehenna, the place where rubbish is burned. God is the one who watches over us and will never leave us. The other reason which we have for not being afraid is because we are in God's hands. God loves you, God knows you, God treasures you. Do you believe that? Let me say it again. God loves you, God knows you, God treasures you. Jesus is proud to name you as his friend before his heavenly Father. You are of more value than many sparrows. So live the good news of your salvation, live out the good news that God's Kingdom has come near, because it goes wherever you are; live out the good news with integrity - and **do not be afraid**.

Amen