

Prayer: May the words I speak be those You want spoken, may the words we hear be those You want heard, may we live to Your glory. Amen

We had some good news announced on Friday - the virus alert has gone down from 4 to 3. Things are opening up a lot more. A sense of normality is beginning to return. But how are people feeling about everything? Excited? Thrilled? Eager to get out and get going?

Unfortunately for many it is fear. Is it safe to go out? Isn't this all too soon? Will I catch the virus? Many have lost the confidence of going out. Some, even in our congregation have fallen at home, and are now wondering if they will ever go out again.

But have you noticed how that each Sunday during lockdown there's been something in our Bible reading that has been so relevant for today's situation? That's despite it being a book that was compiled centuries ago and written over many more! Just as God spoke then, he continues to speak to us now, both through his written word and also through his created world – and we'll be considering both this morning.

We'll first consider the context of today's reading. Pam introduced it to us last week (and if you want to catch up that service is still available on Youtube). Jesus having called the twelve disciples was now sending them out into the villages to preach, to heal and to prepare the way for his coming. I wonder how they felt? Excited? Thrilled? Eager to get out and get going?

I imagine some were fearful. They didn't feel ready yet to be thrust out into the villages; who would listen to them? How would they cope? Even Jesus hadn't been welcome everywhere. He'd received many hateful insults particularly from those well respected in society; he'd even been accused of being the prince of demons! And several members of his own family had said he was out of his mind!

Perhaps fear was their overwhelming emotion; their stomachs were churning – their palms sweating – their faith dwindling - Jesus - you're asking too much - Jesus - we don't want to go!

But did you notice what words occurred 3 times in our reading? Don't be afraid. This command occurs more than any other in whole Bible – significantly 365 times – so every day there's a separate reminder from God not to be afraid! He must know how fearful we are prone to be!

Rather than fear we need to remember that God knows everything. What is hidden will be revealed. God's word will stand firm.

Sadly we spend much of our time and energy worried about the impression we make on people; what they are going to think of us? How they will react? We're forever making comparisons – and longing to be accepted. While there are times when this is right – it is damaging if we let it become the determining factor of everything we do. Our number one fear should be of God! He is sovereign over all, He is judge – and as Jesus said he can destroy body and soul in hell.

So Jesus is telling us to be terrified of God? Far from it! Yes we should fear God – and we need to acknowledge his holiness and where we have gone wrong in our lives and ignored him and seek his forgiveness. But fear of God is also about being awestruck by his power and might and living in joyful awareness of God's grandeur.

I've found it fascinating in our readings recently to notice when in a dialogue Jesus refers to God as father. Here - immediately after talking about fearing God – Jesus speaks, three times, of God

as Father! A Father who loves and protects far more than any earthly Father. And that's worth holding onto, particularly today on Father's Day. You may have difficult memories of your relationship with your father but hopefully you'll find comfort in knowing there is a heavenly Father who loves and values you.

Jesus then went on to speak about the sparrows. I'm someone who loves to watch the birds in the garden. It's been a great pastime during lockdown. I marvel at the natural world and recognise behind it all our creator's amazing glory and interest in intricate detail.

But the disciples may well have wondered what on earth Jesus was going to say as sparrows had such little value! I was preparing a Zoom family quiz earlier in the month and decided to do my round on numbers in the Bible; they're the only questions I seem to be able to answer (I hope Tracy is listening!!).

How many sparrows are sold for a penny? We're told here - 2. But when you turn to Luke's gospel – how many sparrows are sold for 2 pennies? No it's not 4 – it's actually 5. Buy 4 get one free was around in Jesus time! Sparrows were that worthless they threw another one in for nothing.

During the week I listened to a sermon by John Stott who not only was a great preacher but also a dedicated ornithologist. He presented these 4 facts about sparrows

- 1) their distribution is almost worldwide – and they are probably the commonest of all land birds
- 2) they are known to be aggressive and pugnacious – they are really badly behaved birds
- 3) they are the dullest of birds – they are drab, unattractive and haven't any iridescent plumage and are often simply referred to as LBJs – little brown jobs!
- 4) one of the most unmusical of all birds – with no recognisable song; they just chirp with sounds that are often grating to the ear!

So sadly there's not much going for the sparrow – but Jesus chose this bird to illustrate how much value God places on them. Not one of these common, aggressive, dull, songless birds falls to the ground without God our Father knowing. That's awesome!

William Barclay in his commentary even suggests that the world "falls" doesn't so much mean when the bird dies – but from the Greek translation of an Aramaic word it is more likely to mean to light upon the ground. So God is aware of every time a sparrow lights and hops along. What a tremendous thought!

Now every time you notice a sparrow hopping along the ground you can remember – God knows about this sparrow – he cares about him - and I'm worth so much more to him than many sparrows!

Knowing we're surrounded by such love, surely that should take away our fear and bring us to a place of trust – confident of our Father's care and protection?

Jesus went on to say even the hairs on your head are counted. Well they are definitely so much more noticeable at the moment - but I'll resist the temptation to talk about hairstyles and lockdown!!

Can the moment by moment knowledge of the Father's love and protection make a difference to the way we live? I believe it can – if we are prepared to follow Jesus. But following Jesus always comes with a cross.

Just as Jesus sent the disciples out, so he still wants to send us out to speak his words and live his life not being conformed by the world but transforming it! There will be times when we are misunderstood and may even be occasions when we have to choose between doing what Jesus calls us to do and what those closest to us want.

We can never take the cross out of Christianity – but we can discover that surprising paradox - that when we give up our lives for Christ and die to our self-centred ambitions and desires, we find fullness of life in partnership with God himself which far exceeds our expectations.

Prayer: Father thank you for your amazing world and the constant reminders of your love for us. Help us to replace fear with trust in Your love and care for us. Give us the courage to follow Jesus even though it is the way of the cross that we may discover in You life in all its fullness. Amen

You may enjoy <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0615qcc9EEc>

Rev E. Blackmore

