

SERMON - WHY ARE YOU SO AFRAID?

For those who don't know, I have 5 daughters. So, there's been a familiar scenario that I've encountered many times in my life, down the years. Which is this.

I'm sitting somewhere in my home, chilling out in my own chill zone, when suddenly I hear the sound of one of my daughters screaming. *"dad, dad come now, come quickly"*. So I dash to whatever room they're in, saying ... *"What, what is it?"* Only to have them point to the ceiling or the wall and say ... *"look at that spider, it's HUGE. Can you get rid of it NOW!"*

To which I usually say something like ... *"it's just a spider it can't hurt you. You should only be afraid of something that's actually a real threat"*. *"If that spider was a tarantula, then your fear is a reasonable response. But that is just a house spider."*

To which their response is always the same ... *"I don't care dad, just get rid of it"*.

But this is the nature of fear, it's a strange beast.

It works on many insidious and irrational levels. And the effects of fear and the fruit of fear, can be wide ranging and very destructive in all sorts of ways. On a personal level, and society around us.

I was talking a few weeks back to a teenager about the subject of fear and being afraid. And this person told me that they'd recently been away with some friends and one night they all got talking, and asked each other to name their biggest fear.

The first friend who was 17 with relatively older parents, said their biggest fear was losing mum and dad while she was still young.

The other friend said that their biggest fear, was what they now saw, as a growing intolerance and prejudice of those who are different. The Christchurch shootings had really shocked them to the core. Because now the fruits of prejudice and intolerance wasn't something that happened 'over there' in another country ... now it had come home to roost right here in Aotearoa NZ. And this young person was frightened.

So I said to the young person telling me all this "and what was your biggest fear. This teenager paused for a moment. Looked at me and said ... *"my biggest fear, is losing hope"*.

As you can imagine, this was a pretty sobering reply to hear from one so young. And yet, I wasn't altogether surprised. Because what both these young people had named, is a fear that many are sharing today.



As I look at the world around me, I'm deeply concerned by the growing spirit of intolerance and polarisation, that I see happening in so many arenas of life.

There's a growing attitude of prejudice towards 'the other' whoever the other may be. A growing tendency to scapegoat and demonise those who are different - or hold a different perspective to our own. There's a retreat into a more tribal nationalistic mindset.

Civil discourse and the spirit of grace appears to be a lost art.

People are talking AT each other rather than TO each other.

And social media has **amplified** the shrill voices, **calcified** the entrenched attitudes, and **intensified** the spite, the venom, and the suspicion. Little wonder that Jesus called Satan 'the accuser'.

And let's not kid ourselves that the church is immune to this destructive spirit. I've been part of many a discussion among Christians that hasn't exactly overflowed with fruit of the Spirit qualities, like gentleness, kindness, patience and humility.

BUT HERE'S THE THING

When you look closely under the surface, of all this polarisation and division – when you listen closely to the language of accusation and counter accusation –

What you see is what we've always seen.

Lurking deep in the dark recesses of the human condition is the spirit of fear.



**Fear, always has been, always will be, the fertile soil,
from which all kinds of bad fruit can take root and grow.**

And yes, I'm a little fearful of where this is taking us all.

Because there's always opportunist leaders who exploit the spirit of fear by stoking the flames of people's anxiety. Mostly for their own gain and power. Jesus called them **"False prophets. So called saviour's, who come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ferocious wolves.** Jesus also said, **'you will recognize them by their fruit.'**

You only need a basic understanding of history, to see what happens when we scapegoat whole swathes of people and begin to dehumanise men, women and children because of their race, colour or creed. It's never good fruit.

I don't know if you've seen Taika Waititi's new film **Jo Jo Rabbit**. It's trademark quirky but it shows us what happens when fear gets its deadly grip on the human heart.

So there is a very, very good spiritual reason, why one particular verse, is the most repeated verse in the whole of scripture. Many scholars say that it's repeated in one form or another 365 times. That's a dose of this important wisdom for each day of the year. What is this verse? ... **'Do not fear or do not be afraid'**

The writers of Holy Scripture clearly understood a deep truth about our human condition. **That nothing has the capacity to separate us from God's will and God's way, like the spirit of fear.**

We know from our own experiences just how toxic the spirit of fear can be. It paralyzes and debilitates. It steals our peace and our joy. It can even steal our sense of perspective and our capacity to think and act rationally.

I love that O/T verse we had today from Proverbs ... 4:3 **Above all else, guard your heart, because everything in life flows from it.** Clearly, scripture is telling us ... guard your heart from the spirit of fear.

ALL OF WHICH, MAKES THAT THAT BIG QUESTION FROM JESUS - WHY ARE YOU SO AFRAID? AND THE QUESTION WE'VE BEEN ASKING THROUGHOUT THE SERIES - WHO ARE YOU? – SUCH TELLING AND PERTINENT ONES.



- **Who are we for such a time as this?**
 - **In this arena, of fear driven polarisation, how can we the Church, be the spirit and the fruit of grace and reconciliation?**
 - **AND for us here at St George's, how does all of this speak into our vision for the kind of church, we want to be for 2020 and beyond.**
- What does Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, CALL us to be?**

Well in our Gospel reading today, Jesus tells us, that **'By our fruits we will be known'**. The people of Christ, and the Church of Christ, will be recognised by the kind of fruit we bear out in our lives.

And in Galatians 5:22-23, Paul tells us, what this fruit looks like.

The fruit of the Holy Spirit is when our lives grow in the beautiful qualities of **love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.**

Fear of course, will steal away our capacity to live out these beautiful qualities. Have you ever tried to be kind, gentle, patient and self-controlled when you're in the grip of fear? It's why Paul calls us to **'live by the Spirit'** and keep **'in step with the Spirit.'**

And this for me, is where the great genius of Jesus comes into play.

Because if you had to pick a vision of truth, for how we do church, how we do life, in a way that radiates these beautiful qualities of the Spirit - and in a way that is pleasing to God... what would it look like?



The genius of Jesus ... is that he captures all of this vision, and all of this truth in one sentence. In **Matthew 7: verse 12 he says this ... 12 In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.**

Now I just want to pause on this for a moment. Because it's a teaching that we're so familiar with, that the magnitude of its meaning can often be lost.

When Jesus gives us a spiritual truth, and then tells us, that this truth SUMS UP, all the Law and the Prophets... I think we need to sit up and take serious notice?

This a 'biggie' for what it means to be human, in a way that God wants us to be human.

In all things, says Jesus. In every arena of your life, treat others, in exactly the same way, as you would wish to be treated yourself.

This is a teaching often known as the Golden Rule, because it's a universal wisdom, and it's pretty obvious why. It's the gold standard of how we should do humanity in a way that's pleasing to God, unshackled by the influence of fear.

Imagine a world where we only did to others, what we would want done to ourselves.

- Would we see a world in which we spend more money on weapons of destruction, than we do on education?
- Would we see a world, with images of children lying lifeless among the rubble of blown up buildings and then describe it, as 'collateral damage'?
- Would we see the conflict in relationships and the hurt we inflict upon each other in all walks of life?
 - Would we see the huge disparity between the rich and the poor we currently see? **Or would we see a different kind of fruit?**

A world where the God given resources of this earth, are shared more equally for the common good? A world where all our creative endeavours and energies are used to bring 'life'.



It's pretty clear that humanity has too often failed to grasp this Golden rule.

Easy to say - difficult to do.

It's why in the very next verse, Jesus calls it the narrow way. the way of Christ that very few enter.

But just in case we under-estimate the power of this teaching, ask yourself this.

Where else in scripture does Jesus tell us, that living our lives a certain way, SUMS UP all the Law and the Prophets?

It's in the 2 greatest commandments of course. **Love God AND love your neighbour as you would want to be loved yourself.** Jesus connects the Golden Rule and the Greatest commandment. WHY? Because, BOTH are the way and truth of Radical LOVE. The only way, says Jesus, that brings us life.

And the while we're connecting the big dots of scripture. **What's the only thing that drives out the destructive spirit of fear? 1 John 4:18 ... Only perfect love - casts out fear.**



SO, THIS IS OUR MEASURE, THIS IS OUR CALLING. THIS IS OUR VISION.

One of my all-time favourite quotes is this ... **“Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage.”** I have it above my desk alongside the words of Christ **“With God all things are possible”**. We will always feel afraid and know fear, but our faith gives us the courage to face these fears and not let them shrink us.

Wherever the spirit of fear, is giving oxygen to intolerance, polarisation and division, we as the Church of Christ are called to walk the narrow way of courageous love. The narrow way is not a one-off conversion. Every single day we're faced with the choice of which way to choose. And we must never let fear, push us into taking the wider easier way, that Jesus tells us, leads us to some form of destruction.

I want to close with a personal story of how this was all brought home to me up at Waitangi recently.

There's lots of discussion around at the moment among Christians, about who are God's people and God's leaders for this time. Which leaders most reflect Christian values etc. **So how do we discern?**

**For me, I hold up the mirror of today's teachings from Jesus and Paul.
To the voices around me AND to my own heart.
Because by our fruits, we will all be recognised.**

On Waitangi Day, there was a church service on the grounds with leaders from all the various Church traditions, who were all invited to speak for about 5 mins.

Many spoke about how in the atrocity of Christchurch, we'd seen this incredible coming together of people from all the ethnic and faith communities, in a spirit of reconciliation. An incredible outpouring of radical and **courageous** love (because that's what we witnessed) that helped to cast out a nations fear.

But then Brian Tamaki got up to speak. Invited for 5 mins but held the stage for 25. And I want to emphasise I'm not just picking Brian Tamaki for an easy target.

Because he did name a few truths about the hurts and fears that people are carrying in this country. There's no doubt that this country has sold aspects of its soul to the dollar and the highest bidder. His work with the 'Man Up' project has helped change lives. But then he said this, and I quote. *"Don't even get me started on immigrants, they're termites and parasites feeding off the host country."* ... To which his supporters cheered loudly.

So I asked myself a question.

Is this the language that reflects the fruit of the Holy Spirit?
Or is it the language that stokes the flames of fear?

When any leader, from any institution or any country, professes to be a prophet speaking up for Christian values, we need to do 2 very important things.

- **Look at their actions.** Do they treat others as they would wish to be treated?
- **Listen to their language.** Do they reflect the Spirit's fruit of gentleness, kindness humility and self-control?

If they do, then we can know that we're listening to an expression of the Holy Spirit and the way of Christ.

If we hear language that is unkind, divisive, lacking in self-control and stoking fear, usually for their own cause ... then it may be many things, but is it Christian?
Or is it the spirit of the wolf in sheep's clothing?

THE GOOD NEWS IS, I also heard so many positive voices in Waitangi. And I came back with a real sense of having seen the Spirit at work, in hearts and lives.

I witnessed so many Christians speaking of their desire to be an instrument of Christ's love and reconciliation in the hurts and the wounds of this country and beyond.

So many on fire with a vision to build bridges and work for the fruits of restoration.

To make Christ known through our fruits.

This has to be the vision for any church of Christ in 2020

To 'live by the Spirit' and keep 'in step with the Spirit.'

Walk the narrow way of Christ. The way of radical courageous love.

