

Year A Proper 19

1 Kings 19: 9-18

Romans 10: 5-15

Matthew 14: 22-33

Fear is natural

I have been afraid, and I mean really afraid only a couple of times in my life. Not times when I got a bit of a scare, a passing moment when the adrenalin courses through your body and fight or flight instincts momentarily kick in. Really afraid – when I have pondered my very existence, felt an existential threat. Fear is a natural emotion, caused by a situation we find ourselves in. It is normally a situation where we feel we have no or at best, minimal control over the situation or outcome. Although it is unwelcome, it is natural to feel fear.

Fortunately, most of us only experience a few such moments in our lives. However, they can shape us. They can give us a deep insight as to what we really value. They can help us learn from all the thoughts that go through our minds at such times. We can learn from how we behave and what we say to others at such times.

In our Old Testament and Gospel readings we have two quite different stories that help us explore fear.

Elijah has had a powerful prophetic ministry, even defeating the prophets of Baal. Elijah's power was such that all the prophets of Baal were killed. But despite holding such power and knowing that God's actions and power had acted for his benefit, Elijah was afraid of the fury of Queen Jezebel who had resolved to kill Elijah because he had killed all of her prophets. Elijah was afraid for his life, so much so, that we are told, he ran 100 miles to Beer-sheba and then further into the desert and eventually up Mount Sinai. It was only there that he felt safe, hiding in a cave.

And it was only after he stopped running, after that initial period of fear that Elijah, that great and powerful prophet, felt able to pray with the LORD. Elijah spent the night in the cave, and it was in the morning that the LORD passed by. And we learn that the LORD was not in the wind. The LORD was not in the

earthquake. The LORD was not in the fire. The LORD was in the 'sound of sheer silence'. What a lovely phrase, 'the sound of sheer silence'.

The wind, earthquake and fire were all actual events, but I wonder if they describe the disturbance in Elijah's mind, how disturbed and unsettled he had become. It was only when the Elijah heard the sound of sheer silence that he went out and stood at the entrance of the cave, wrapped his face with his mantle, and met with the LORD. He was only able to meet the LORD once the disturbances had finished. He was only able to meet and dialogue with the LORD in the sound of sheer silence.

I don't know about you, but when I am in some mental turmoil, achieving any semblance of stilling of the mind, of getting to the point of silence is hard to achieve. I do know that if I focus on achieving a stilling of my mind I am able to sit in silence and acknowledge the presence of God. Christian meditation has been an important aspect of my spiritual life; recognising that all the chatter in my head, all those disturbances, hinder my connecting with and being in the presence of God.

In our gospel reading – another familiar story – I want to highlight a few related points.

Jesus has just spent a day with the disciples, and as we discovered last week, Jesus got them to feed the five thousand with five loaves and two fish that he had blessed. Jesus withdrew, 'up the mountain by himself to pray'. He was there alone, without any distractions. I imagine that all he could hear was the sounds of birds and insects, so not perhaps the sound of sheer silence Elijah experienced, but enough for Jesus to feel the silence and know that he was able to pray to his Father. Jesus would still have been processing his thoughts and feelings about the execution of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod. His grieving had been interrupted by the crowds earlier that day.

We know that Jesus often retreated to a quiet place to pray, and I am sure on that evening he needed that time in the prayerful company of his Father more than ever.

And then we come to the dramatic scene of the disciples in a storm-tossed boat in the dark of the night. They wouldn't have much idea where they were on the sea of Galilee, in the dark, how close they may have been to land. They would have been full of fear. But as day broke they saw Jesus coming towards

them, and he was walking on the water! No wonder the gospel story tells us that they were terrified and they shouted out in fear. Jesus said to them, "Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid."

We all know the story, of how Peter got out of the boat and walked towards Jesus. But notice that in his fear Peter has doubt. He said, "Lord, **if** it is you command me to come to you on the water." "Lord, **if** it is you..." That is quite a significant **if**! In his fear, does Peter not recognise Jesus? Quite understandable really. It is amazing how fear can make us see and think, and start mistrusting and questioning things.

And so Jesus simply invited him by saying "Come." He didn't need to say any more to convince Peter. Peter got out of the boat and started walking. Then Peter became frightened and he began to sink. He cried out "Lord save me!" Jesus came towards him, he reached out and caught him.

In his fear, Peter had doubted Jesus, when Jesus said "Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid." Jesus is puzzled and when they get in the boat Jesus asks Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" And yet, despite the doubt in Peter's words, Jesus came to him in his time of need.

The story of Elijah and the disciples in the storm-tossed boat both describe fear. They remind us of that fear can make us do and think strange things, things that are not good for us.

The story of Elijah and the disciples in the storm-tossed boat describe what happens when those in trouble call out; how the storms are stilled and calm and peace reigns. Being in God's presence and being in Jesus' presence is all that is needed to allow for fear to subside and peace to come.

The story of Elijah and the disciples in the storm-tossed boat describe the humans being approached by God and Jesus respectively, in their times of trouble. They reach out, they cry out, and they are given peace, they are saved.

In our lives we do have times of fear, times of wondering, "is this it?" Of having to take stock, and try and subdue the panic bubbling up inside. Of having all sorts of 'what if' internal conversations, or more likely monologues, that unsettle us and keep us awake. We worry and fret and look for answers and solutions where there may, at that moment be no clear answers. These two readings today give us a guide as to what we can do. We can call upon the Lord for help. But to do so we may need to focus on that call and focus on our Lord.

It isn't easy, but if our mind is having a full-blown monologue with itself, there isn't much chance for our prayers and time with our Lord to be enriching. Learning to still our minds, to reach a place of quiet peace, maybe even hearing the sound of sheer silence as Elijah did, is where we will be met by our Lord, our Lord coming to us.

In both readings it is God and Jesus who approach the fearful. It is their loving action to come into the presence of the fearful. The fearful just need to make the space to be receptive and to respond in faith when Jesus says, "Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid."

As we settle to make time for Jesus, we are able to find peace because we are assured of Jesus' love and compassion working for good. In faith we can then reach out to Jesus in prayer and know that in his love and compassion, his message to us is "Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid".

It would be easy to become like one of Job's comforters at this point. However, I cannot adequately tell you or explain why sometimes Jesus' presence leads to a healing of a situation.

I cannot adequately tell you or explain why sometimes Jesus' presence does not bring healing of a situation, but instead his presence brings us a different type of healing and wholeness; the type that gives us the strength and peace to know that we are not alone on our life's journey, and no matter what we face, Jesus is with us, beside us, in front and behind us. Jesus is saying, "Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid".

These two readings remind us of the power of fear, and how it can distort our view of the world. These two readings also bring us the good news that when we pray we can access the power of the Lord, gain a sense of peace and stillness that enables us to know that in our only too natural fear, Jesus is with us. Jesus is saying, "Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid". Jesus, our prince of peace is with us, bringing us out of our fear to a place of healing and wholeness.

One of my strongest senses of Christ's presence was in a Christian meditation session. Having practiced how to get the noisy chatter from my head to cease – and that still takes some doing – I was able to sit in the silent presence of Christ. Like any form of fitness, exercise is important, so having a regular discipline of Christian meditation is important in enabling me to be 'prayer fit',

so to speak; to still myself and be at peace in the presence of God the father, son and Holy Spirit.

During this time of COVID-19 we have all naturally been afraid to some degree or another. Fear is a sensible emotion, it keeps us safe in such situations, keeps us mindful of how we should act to reduce the opportunities for the virus to infect us and those we love. This type of fear doesn't overwhelm us, but again to keep things in perspective, knowing we can find peace in the company of our Lord is important.

In our busy lives, or in our lives where we can so easily keep our minds so busy and noisy, it is a good spiritual discipline to spend some time in silence and be ready to listen to the voice of God. I commend it to you.

And in your time of need, I pray you will know Christ's presence and hear Him say, "Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid".