

## **Don't fear anyone or anything - except God**

On several different websites, I have recently read the account (2006) by John Thomas Oaks of his real life experience, one November night, in the Starbucks coffee shop on Manhattan, New York. John was doing a fun, but highly lucrative gig, playing keyboard and singing backup for a friend. Most songs were from the '40s to the '90s with a few original tunes mixed in. During their rendition of "If You Don't Know Me by Now," John noticed a lady sitting in front of him swaying to the beat and singing along. Afterwards she said to him: "I apologize for singing along on that song. Did it bother you?" "No," John replied. "We love it when the audience joins in. Would you like to sing up front for the next one?" Surprisingly she asked him to choose a hymn that John could do quite easily. "How about 'His Eye is on the Sparrow'?" "OK, let's do that one," she said.

Straightening her jacket and with a quick warm-up she began to sing. "Why should I be discouraged? Why should the shadows come?" Coffee drinkers and staff were transfixed. The song rose to its conclusion: "I sing because I'm happy; I sing because I'm free. For His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me." The applause crescendoed. John commented: "You, my dear, have made my whole year! That was beautiful!" "Well, it's funny that you picked that particular hymn," she said, "that was my daughter's favourite song. She was 16 and she died of a brain tumour last week." She smiled through tear-filled eye: "I'm gonna be okay. I've just got to keep trusting the Lord and singing His songs, and everything's gonna be just fine." She picked up her bag, and she was gone.

'I've just got to keep trusting the Lord and everything's gonna be just fine!' Is this what Jesus was referring to in our Gospel today? The most repeated command in the Bible is "Do not be afraid". Yet to be afraid is one of the most easy and understandable things. Fear can be a debilitating force in our life. Worldwide there are hundreds of recognised phobias which impact on people's lives. According to Psychology Today, the five most common fears among Americans are: Arachnophobia (fear of spiders); Glossophobia (fear of speaking in public); Aerophobia (fear of flying); Claustrophobia (fear of confined spaces); and Acrophobia (fear of heights). These are the same for the UK but in a different order. Hundreds of other phobias, less known and less common, affect people, such as xanthophobia (fear of the colour yellow), turophobia (fear of cheese), somniphobia (fear of falling asleep), hylophobia (fear of trees), ombiophobia (fear of rain), pogonophobia (fear of beards) and tryphobia (fear of holes). And I am sure that all of us here, in church this morning, suffer from homilophobia. I do but for a totally different reason to all of you! I will leave that one with you!

Phobias aside, fear is draining. Fear of uncertainty about a serious illness or fear of test results, the imminent threat of a job loss or actually losing it; financial problems, family crises, fear of being left alone, of being unable to cope. Fear is very real. Today's gospel is all about fear. Jesus needed to tell his disciples not to be afraid. He had just warned of all the unpleasant things the authorities would do to them. They will suffer emotional and physical abuse and Jesus told them not to be afraid even though they faced the threat of death. But Jesus surprises us with his reasoning. He doesn't emphasise that "everything's

gonna be just fine, whatever happens”, as the lady in the coffee shop said, but that the day will come when everything will be made clear. That which was covered God will expose. People get anxious when there is talk of a disclosure of private thoughts, words, actions, feelings, increasing not decreasing fear. But Jesus is assuming, here, that, what will be seen clearly on that day, will be the disciples’ loyalty and faith. They will be seen to be true to their Lord, loyal, hardworking and patient for their Master. Whatever their actions may have seemed like at the time, they will be seen for what they have always tried to show - a determination to follow Jesus. Their actions will be vindicated. So Jesus IS saying: ‘Do not be afraid’, and ‘God will look after you’.

Jesus also says that we must fear God; an awe of God because he has the power to destroy both body and soul in hell. First, then, we are instructed, time again, not to be afraid for God knows us and will take care of us and then we are told that we must fear him! But to say we "fear" God does not mean we're afraid of him. 2 Timothy 1:7 clarifies this, stating that "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and self-discipline". The fear of God is an awesome respect emanating from the greatness of God, out of an understanding of his power and to do this we need to understand his nature. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, C.S. Lewis portrays Jesus Christ as a lion, as in Revelation (Chapter 5). He writes: "As the Lion passed by they were terribly afraid he would turn and look at them, yet in some queer way they wished he would. Naturally one would be nervous meeting a lion! The question was asked to one who knew this Lion well, "Is he safe? I find the answer both wise and startling: Safe? Who said anything about safe? Of course He isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." The fear of God is the one fear that removes all others.

At this point Jesus makes a promise about the love and care of God, not only for every one of his creatures, but for every hair on their heads. If God can number something as trivial as the few hairs on my head and the many more on each of yours, then he knows everything else about us as well AND he cares. Bishop Tom Wright<sup>1</sup>, in his commentary on this passage, makes the point that preachers sometimes criticise their congregations for praying about a parking space in a busy street, fine weather for an outdoor event, for lost keys or a purse to turn up. He says that although there are more important things to pray about and we must ensure we do pray for these, if God really does take note of every hair on our head, then surely as there is nothing too great for him to care about, so there is nothing too small for him to care about as well. We make a mistake if we think there is anything too small or insignificant to bring to the Lord. If he cares about each hair, he cares about everything in your life and mine.

And along with hairs, Jesus mentions sparrows! Sparrows - common, unpretentious, little birds! Jesus says: “How much would you get for a couple of sparrows? A penny if you're lucky? And not one of them falls to the ground without your father knowing about it...So don't be afraid. You're worth much more than a great many sparrows.”

One of the most famous of all Christian songs, ‘His Eye is on the Sparrow’ was sung, on

---

<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright: *Matthew for Everyone* Matthew Part 1 Chapters 1-15

that November day, in that Starbucks coffee shop on Manhattan. Written by Civilla Martin in 1905, the song has been performed by 22 separate, professional artists since 1951. It was a famous song in the film, *Sister Act 2*, and the late Whitney Houston recorded it for the soundtrack of the film *Sparkle* released in 2012. The writer, Civilla wrote that she had a deep friendship with a couple, the wife of whom had been bedridden for over twenty years and her husband was an incurable cripple who had to get to and from his work in a wheel chair. Despite their problems, they lived happy Christian lives, being an inspiration to all who knew them. One day Civilla asked them the secret of their joy in the midst of pain. The wife's reply was: 'If His eye is on the sparrow, then I know He watches me.' The simplicity of this expression of faith so impacted on Civilla that, that same evening she wrote the words for the song. "Why should I feel discouraged? Why should the shadows come? Why should my heart feel lonely, and long for heaven and home? When Jesus is my portion, a constant friend is He. His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches over me. His eye is on the sparrow; and I know He watches me. I sing because I'm happy. I sing because I'm free! His eye is on the sparrow; and I know He watches me." Millions of people, since 1905, have heard, sung and been so inspired by these words. What more need I, or can I say!

Peter Smith

22/6/14