

Our readings from the bible this morning present us with three big challenges. One is from Paul's letter to the Romans with Paul explaining baptism and sin and the death of Jesus, but I'm afraid that will have to wait for another day. As Angela and I have said over the next 3 months we are preaching on the Matthew readings – but don't worry, there is plenty in there to get our teeth into this morning. It is part of what is known as the second of Matthew's five collections of sayings – the first one being the Sermon on the Mount – and other three are still to come. We are going to look first at fear, and then we will look at this most challenging of passages where Jesus appears to want to cause splits in families.

I wonder if there are things in your life that you are afraid of – I don't mean something that you'd rather just avoid, but something you are genuinely fearful of? For me, the worst thing is my fear of heights. I struggle with vertigo – to me it seems terribly illogical, but it is a genuine fear that in some circumstances I feel completely unsafe – if I am about to fall.

So when I hear about people talking about skydiving – I just think that is mad. There is a clip on YouTube where the American actor Will Smith talks about skydiving. He talks about being out with his mates and over a drink or two they all say, yeah, let's go skydiving, what a great idea. He tells this a bit more dramatically than I am going to today, but suffice to say when he gets to the morning of the jump he hasn't slept the night before; he hasn't eaten anything, and he is just desperately hoping that his mates won't turn up. But they do, and the aeroplane takes off, and they fly up to 14,000 feet, and he looks at the traffic light system they are operating.

It's on red, and he hopes – perhaps it'll get stuck, but no, it goes to amber, and then to green, and the door of the plane opens and he looks out and all he can see is fear. The guys on the plane tell him he'll be fine, and they'll count to three. One, Two, and then they push him out – apparently at three people hang on to the plane like nothing else. But then, Will says, a second later, and the fear just disappears. Instead of fear you are flying. And he says two things. First the point of maximum danger is the point of minimum fear – quite a transformation. And then he questions why he was so scared and he says this, "God placed the best things in life on the other side of fear." "God placed the best things in life on the other side of fear." Whilst you will never get me skydiving, I could begin to see what he meant.

And in today's gospel reading, three times we are told Do not be afraid.

First Jesus says, "But don't be afraid of those who threaten you. For the time is coming when everything that is covered will be revealed, and all that is secret will be made known to all." For some people the idea that all their secrets are going to become known to other people will just add to the fear factor rather than reassure them. What about investigations into the reasons for the Iraq war? What about Boris Johnson and party gate? But the point Jesus is making here is that his disciples are following what Jesus and his father God are telling them to do, and in the fullness of time it will be revealed to people that they were doing the right thing. Which is why Jesus goes on to say, "What I tell you now in the darkness, shout abroad when daybreak comes. What I whisper in your ear, shout from the housetops for all to hear!"

Or to put it simply, don't be afraid to tell the truth – but make sure it is the truth you are telling. When we talk about spreading the gospel we talk about spreading the truth so don't be afraid.

Second, "Don't be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot touch your soul." But then Jesus says this. "Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell." So is Jesus now telling his disciples don't be afraid but actually do be afraid and then he'll come on again in a bit to say don't be afraid again for the third time. What's going on here, when he says, "Fear only God who can destroy both soul and body in hell"? What Jesus is saying is Israel was faced in his day by enemies at two quite different levels. There was the establishment, Rome, Herod, and their underlings. They were the ones

who had the power to kill the body. But there were other, darker enemies, who had the power to kill the soul as well: enemies who were battling for that soul even then, during Jesus' ministry, and who were using the more obvious enemies as a cover. Yes, Jesus is saying fear God, because he has the ultimate power over us if we choose not to follow him, if we fight against him, but the real enemy is those people who through false teaching aim to undermine Jesus.

And third, Jesus talks to us about the importance of us to God. "What is the price of two sparrows - one copper coin? But not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid.; you are more valuable to God than the whole flock of sparrows." And what this saying is telling us is that, yes, we are all really individually important to God, but more than that, God is interested in every single aspect of our lives.

I have heard some people criticise some Christians for praying about what they would see as trivia – am I going to find a parking space, what should I wear when I go and meet someone – but to me this reference to sparrows is saying, even the smallest of things matter to God, so don't be afraid about anything – because you can bring anything to God in prayer.

So, Don't be afraid.

And then we come to the second part of our gospel reading which starts:

"Don't imagine that I came to bring peace to the Earth! I came not to bring peace, but a sword."

Actually, sorry, but that is what I imagined.

Isaiah 6: 6-7. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.

Zechariah 9: 10 I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations.

And Matthew himself would later talk about fulfilling a prophecy: "Tell the people of Jerusalem, 'Look, your King is coming to you. He is humble, riding on a donkey — riding on a donkey's colt.'"

and I could go on, so what is going here?

Peace making is an essential part of the good life as Matthew himself records in the Sermon on the Mount. But the point is that the way to peace is not by the avoidance of conflict, and whilst, yes, Jesus often spoke of peace, he never shied away from conflict – just ask the various pharisees and other leaders of the Jewish church; just consider Jesus' approach to Samaritans – the arch enemy of Israel – whether that was the Good Samaritan caring for the man beaten up, or the Samaritan woman by the

well; what about the way he turned the tables in the temple when the so called traders were abusing the temple facilities. So yes, Jesus wanted people to live in peace – but not at any cost.

I sometimes wonder what Jesus would make of the church today. There were clearly some things that Jesus was not afraid of that we often find harder. Change is one of those things. How good are we at looking at ourselves and saying, “Are we really doing the right things? Are we doing the best we can? Are we scared of change because that might upset some people.”

Or indeed are we scared of other people changing something that we particularly like? I’m not talking about anything specific but change in general can be a scary thing. And Jesus goes on to say that he has come to cause splits. Really?

Well, maybe or maybe not. This passage is not new. Jesus is quoting the prophet Micah. In chapter 7 the prophet says,

“How miserable I am!

I feel like the fruit picker after the harvest

who can find nothing to eat.

Not a cluster of grapes or a single early fig

can be found to satisfy my hunger.

The godly people have all disappeared;

not one honest person is left on the earth.

then a bit later says

Don’t trust anyone—

not your best friend or even your wife!

For the son despises his father.

The daughter defies her mother.

The daughter-in-law defies her mother-in-law.

Your enemies are right in your own household!

but then in searching for an answer Micah says

As for me, I look to the Lord for help.

I wait confidently for God to save me,
and my God will certainly hear me.

Do not gloat over me, my enemies!

For though I fall, I will rise again."

So, this issue of family differences has always been around, and what Jesus is saying is that it will carry on. But there is also another aspect to this. We talk frequently about the family of God – the church family. Surely what Jesus is saying is that we will not always agree all of the time, but at the same time he makes one thing clear at the end of our passage. Loving God has to be our number one priority. That's not to say we must stop loving our families – whatever and whoever those families are, but, and this is the hardest thing for any of us to do, loving God has to be our number one priority.

Let me finish with that quote from Will Smith. "God placed the best things in life on the other side of fear." What that statement is saying is that what is important is that whatever life throws at us, we know that by following Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, we are guaranteed eternal life with him in heaven. And that is on the other side of fear. Yes we have to deal with a lot of tricky things in this life, but at the end, we have nothing to fear.

Amen