



Rev Diana Rattray
Fear and Faith
1 Kings 19:9-19
Matthew 14:22-33
Year A Ordinary 19
13 August 2023

This week St Matthews hosted a political debate with four of the candidates standing for the Auckland Central Electorate. One of the topics that was raised, both by some of the candidates in their opening statements and by the moderator, Simon Wilson, in the questions he put to the candidates, was Safety in the City. It is understandable that some people are feeling uneasy and threatened following the recent shootings, homicides and other violent incidents. These are on top of vehicle and property thefts.

The response from law enforcement agencies and politicians alike is that the situation is not simple or straightforward. The underlying social issues amongst those who live and visit the city centre are many and complex. What will not help is crime and safety being used as a political football. Doing so does not address the issues and increases fear and insecurity. What struck me when I read both of the readings we have just heard today was the theme of being fearful.

In the reading from first Kings, we are told that Elijah, despite being faithful to what he has been called to be and do, is feeling alone and fearing for his life. After an order to kill Elijah was made by Queen Jezebel, the formerly confident and commanding man became fearful and ran into the desert and begged to be killed. When he journeys to Horeb, Mt Sinai, Elijah is part of an interaction between human thought, action and limitation on one hand and God's direction on the other.

God is not in the earthquake. God is not in the fire. God is in the silence.

It was not the impressive or magical that confirmed God's presence to Elijah. Elijah was not distracted by the powerful, the political, the destructive. God is in the still small voice. Elijah was overwhelmed by life, and he had temporarily lost perspective.

So do we. For many of us Sunday worship is a time when we gather with others on a similar path, listening for the still small voice that reminds us of what we are doing together. We seek both hope and challenge.

In Matthew's gospel Peter, despite being a fisherman, and being used to the sea, is fearful for his life and all who are on the boat with him. In Jewish culture the sea represented threat. It was linked to the abyss - the deeps. If you can imagine your deepest fear then that was how Peter felt. The literal storm, our metaphorical storm of life, is viewed as being deep and all consuming. So when we are told Peter and the disciples saw the figure of Jesus walking on the water - it was huge. Peter was so overawed by the moment that he requests Jesus to call him and once invited, steps out of the boat and begins walking on the water. Then his uncertainty, his fear, means he starts doubting and sinking. We are told Peter cries out - Jesus save me!

Peter has to overcome his deepest fear and once back on the boat even the wind and waves are stilled.

One thing to note is that we are told that Jesus headed out to the boat before anyone one had asked him to. There are no shortage of storms in our lives and the lives of people around us. There are times when we feel particularly tossed about by the waves. Fearful Grief, life changes, potential disasters rise us and can wear us out.

If we think about the actions of Peter. He stepped out with confidence, and even when his confidence waned and he was literally sinking into his deepest fears on calling out he knew he was not alone. The Christ figure reassured the disciples and stilled the storm. A direct cry yielded a response.

"Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid."

When we never step outside of this chaos, it is difficult to see beyond it. It becomes easy to think that is all there is.

For some it is important to have an external saviour, a call answered literally or figuratively. Reaching out may be a recognition that there is a need for something greater than self to bring about change.

For all of us we can see what Jesus models in the act of stepping away to pray, of getting quiet, of returning with a steadiness that can meet those anxious voices without being consumed by them.

It is not always possible to make a retreat or to physically withdraw to a quiet place. This may be due to pressures of work, of family, or health. However all of us can find ways to lessen the distractions around us, turn off the phone, the computer, the tv. Sitting looking out on the amazing light at sunrise or sunset. Living a more simple and less consumerist life.

Last Friday was the feast day of Clare of Assisi. She was a contemporary of Francis and founded the religious order - the Poor Clare Sisters. As a young aristocratic woman, at the beginning of the 13th Century, Clare was inspired to follow the radical new gospel life modelled by Francis. She was a revolutionary. She embraced poverty and created a way in which women could live a communal life and work to sustain rather than being beholden to family wealth or patronage.

Clare reminds us that we become what we love and what or who we love shapes what we become. If we love nothing, we become nothing. She shed all possessions and external distractions. She loved God and the image of God transformed her and allowed her to have a total compassionate love for all. Yet at the same time she never wanted a life siloed from real life or the monastic life of the Franciscan brothers.

The space to be quiet and reflect opens up new perspectives for us on what is possible and on what we are being called to do. We often think of it as an individual activity of pursuit. Yet seeking a quiet place can be collective, a way to help us to be aware and respond to our collective fears as well as giving us the space to meet others who are in need.

Not many of us are called to the sort of life Clare led. We can however invite the peace of Christ to be with us as we re-engage with the world.

Despite all our fears and failings we are loved and valued.

Elijah's humanity is both encouraging and comforting.

Peter's faith then cry for help is assuring us that God is indeed faithful even in the face of our fear.

Clare models a simplification of life, not just for our own benefit but so that we can share compassionate love for all.

This week I encourage you to act when worries or fears arise. It might be something as simple as taking a deep breath, to ask Atua, Wairua, Love, Christ to be present with you, to fill you with that peace—that steady calm. Whatever we acknowledge internally or externally may it give us fresh eyes to see the way forward and what is possible.

All of this begins with just a quiet moment- the still small voice.¹

Amen.

¹ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/withdraw-pentecost-11-a-august-13-2023/>