

## Fear and Talents Pentecost 22 – 13<sup>th</sup> November 2011

### **Readings:**

#### **Matthew 25: 14-30**

Now I wonder if there are any phobias in church this morning? I know of at least one, and that's my own. One of mine consists of an irrational fear when anyone gets too close to an edge. Now I'm not talking about standing on the brink of a cliff say, but if someone gets within 10 metres of a cliff edge, I start to sweat. And if it's, say, one of my children or Jenny involved I double the distance. On the face of it, not a serious phobia, but none the less debilitating not just for me but for my loved ones. They bear the brunt of my fear. So, I wonder, are there any phobias out there?

Talk to your neighbour about a phobia that you have. And I'd be just as interested to hear if you're one of those rare individuals who is phobia free, I could give you one of mine .....

Fear is a natural consequence of being human- a survival instinct. Young children soon learn to avoid stove tops or flames. Rational fears are good for survival. But there is a darker side to fears which I believe serves to retard behaviours that could benefit us, fears that prevent risk taking in any form. It's not fanciful to say that we live in a risk-averse society, a society that is ruled by insurance companies that prevent us risking - changing a light globe here at church for example, or home cleaners lifting anything, or teachers giving a child an Aspirin or putting on a band-aid. Such fears are not driven by a survival instinct so much as an economic/legal imperative. We don't want to be sued!

And fears can also be conjured up by politicians and the media for their own ends. Law and order fears are often invoked, even when there is clear evidence that crime rates are falling. There are plenty of "chicken-lickens" running around exclaiming that the sky is falling in at any hint of social changes being introduced. And much of this fear-mongering is based on irrational premises.

So when I look at this parable of the talents I am taken with the verse that says "Master, I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed, **so I was afraid**, and went and hid your talent in the ground."

Now I could preach on the justice of the kind of master who reaps where he does not sow, and gathers where he does not scatter seed, but that's another sermon, a good one, but not this one. No, I'm keen this morning to focus in on something that is literally bedevilling our society and our church. Fear that halts change, that impedes ministry.

In Franz Kafka's novel, **The Trial**, the hero, Mr K, wanders into a church where he overhears the priest tell a parable about a man who was told to enter a kingdom through a certain gate. When the man arrived at the gate, he noticed a sentinel guarding the entrance. So he sat down and waited for the sentinel to give him instructions or to grant permission to enter. The guard did nothing. So the man continued to sit there, waiting for something to

happen, waiting for someone to come. For a whole lifetime he sat there. Then the guard closed the door, saying to the man, "The door was made for you, and for you alone. And because you chose not to enter it, it's being closed for ever."

In one interpretation of this parable in Matthew's gospel, God, like the master, has given us all talents. There is not one person in the church who is not gifted, from the youngest to the oldest. But it is easy for many of us to bury our talents because of fear.

I know because the temptation is always there for me. With me it started off with a fear of speaking in public. When I first started teaching welfare students, I spent a considerable time in the loo before I lectured. Fear of failure is another that regularly visits, and sometimes stops me from trying something new. So often we can stagnate. When we live in a society that is risk averse it is easy to do nothing different and to stagnate as a society. And when we live in a church that is risk averse, unwilling to change in any way, yearning for past glories, just as surely that church will stagnate and die.

I want to tell you that failure is often a good thing. It's not good if it prompts the response "I told you so." It is good if it leads you to look for others ways that will not fail. Risk-taking is healthy.

Who was it that said, "Why not go out on a limb, for isn't that where the fruit is?" A healthy church is one that is continually stretching out on a limb to attain the fruits that will bring God's love and peace to the community it finds itself in.

But many congregations are unwilling to take the risk. I was at a meeting recently where risk aversion was all too evident. And I found myself asking, what is it that this particular group is afraid of. For it is always fear that blocks change. And as I demonstrated earlier we all have fears in abundance. Fear of failure, fear of commitment, fear of making waves and standing up for one's rights, fear of trusting others, fear of being alone, fear of being out on a limb. But it's not for nothing that the Scriptures say 99 times "Fear not!"

***"Do not be afraid I am with you, I have called you by your name, you are mine. I have called you by your name, you are mine."***

Do you believe that?

So let me finish with another story, this time written by Victor Hugo. In his story, ***Ninety-three***, Hugo tells of a ship that was caught in a terrific storm. When the storm was at its height, the frightened crew heard a terrible crashing sound from below. A cannon they were carrying had broken loose and was banging into the ship's wooden sides, tearing gaping holes in them with every smashing blow.

Two men, at the risk of their lives, managed to secure the cannon again for they knew that the cannon was more dangerous than the storm. The storm could toss them about, but a loose cannon within could sink them.

Isn't it the same with our lives? The outside storms and problems aren't our real danger. It's the terrible destructive internal "cannons" that we all have that can send us to the bottom. We fuss and fret and fume about extraneous things, fearing forces outside our lives

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over which we have little or no control, when the things that can really destroy us are often within, often of our own making.

It's those things that stop us from changing. It's those things that we need to commit to our God. And with healing comes the courage to change, the courage to be born anew. Committing ourselves afresh to God always helps to quell the internal storms and to empower us to ministry that is life giving.

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