

LUKE 12:32-40
HOPEFUL WAITING

What is the most common phrase in the Bible? I don't know the answer to that, but up there must be *"Do not be afraid!"* It occurs so many times in so many different situations, where God says to us *"do not be afraid"* and often after it *"for I am with you!"* Does that surprise you? Does it surprise you that these words are there so often, that so often God speaks in a reassuring way? Does it change way we think? Do we see God in a different light? This is God who loves and cares for us; this is God who is concerned for our health and well-being; this is God who walks with us and wants to comfort and reassure us when we are in danger and afraid!

What makes you afraid? Sharks? Maybe not! Being ill; someone else being ill; getting old; being on your own; failing a test or an exam; getting a job; leaving home; losing a job; moving house; relationships under strain, even breaking up; other people letting you down; going to a new school for the first time or changing school. Change? Being bullied at school, at work. A crisis in family life that may affect you directly or may affect people you love and you are afraid for them rather than for yourself. Brexit; Indyref. Things you can't control make you feel powerless, helpless, afraid. The thing about being afraid is that often our fears paralyse us; they make us shut down, so that we find them really hard to deal with and really hard to deal with other things at the same time! We can't hear anything from the outside and often we are deaf to God saying *"Do not be afraid; I am with you."*

Crises: there's a couple of crises in the things Jesus says to his disciples in our reading from Luke 12 today; Jesus wants to reassure them about these crises as well as to challenge them to handle these crises in a faith-based way. They don't need to be afraid; they need to wait and watch in faith. That hasn't changed for us as Christians; both sides of this coin still stand for us as we deal with things that make us afraid. Jesus is with us; we handle our fears with faith! That is easier said than done. In crisis times we shut down in some respects, we stop listening to anyone, to God, to other people; we revert to instinct; we almost forget that faith has anything to bring to crisis times. There are a few things that might make disciples afraid; they may sound familiar!

Abram has a crisis: he has no children, yet God has promised him a child! He's not sure about trusting God anymore; he says to God *"surely we need to move on to plan B"*. *"Do not..." (Genesis 15:1) "He took..." (15:5)* There is reassurance for Abram in his crisis; God has not gone away; God's promises are sure and true; God is still there with Abram and is still at work in his family life. *"Abram believed..." (15:6)* There is no need for plan B; God is still at work with Plan A!

"Do not..." (Luke 12:32) "Little flock" – this is the only time we hear that phrase in the Bible! The disciples are a small group; there were only twelve given that title in the gospels; twelve is not many! How can so few contend with all the things that are going on? Jesus wants them to take the good news of the kingdom of God to the nation, but there are only a few of them and the task is so big. Also, perhaps there is a growing sense of tension around Jesus, with His enemies ranging around Him, and they are heading to Jerusalem knowing that this would bring about the crisis that would be His death? There are so few of them; the task is so big; there is danger everywhere – how will they cope?

In the picture that Jesus gives, the servants are waiting. Their master is away from home and they are waiting for him to come back; will that be a crisis time for them? The master is away at a wedding and they have no idea when he will come back. Maybe he will come home in the middle of the night, or just before daylight! How will they handle his coming home? *"Be dressed..." (Luke 12:35f)* They are to be ready to answer the door as soon as he knocks, so that there is no crisis; they are to be ready and able to deal with things. Jesus adds a strange quirk to the story: *"It will..." (Luke 12:37)* The master will turn things on their head and will

serve them; he will give his servants dinner because they were ready to serve him. The crisis is dealt with because they were waiting, ready to meet master, ready to serve.

Let me take you to Palm Sunday! Jesus is riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, the King coming to His city, coming in the name of the Lord. The crowd (a small crowd?) is shouting "hosanna" and waving palm branches and putting branches and coats on the road, an impromptu red carpet! The King is coming and it's great. But we know that not everybody is happy: some of the religious leaders tell the crowd to be quiet! Luke tells us that Jesus comes towards the city: "*As He...*" (Luke 19:41f) Here is a crisis for Jerusalem: God is there but they don't recognise Him. The servants' master is coming, but they are not paying attention. There would be another crisis later, in AD70 when the city was destroyed by the Romans; would that crisis have been avoided if they had seen Jesus for who He really is?

There is the ultimate crisis for the world: judgement day! There will come a day when God will judge the world. That is tied in with Jesus' coming again to the world, the coming of the Son of Man in clouds of glory. There is something of that here in Luke 12: "*You also...*" (Luke 12:40) There are two reactions to this idea of Jesus' coming and of judgement: the first is to laugh at the whole idea as a figment of our overwrought imagination; it will never happen so let's not worry about it. The second is to become fixated by the whole notion and walk around wearing a placard that says "the end of the world is nigh!" Jesus tells us to watch, like servants ready for the master to come home from the wedding, ready to serve him, ready to answer his knock at the door. Waiting! That spirit has been in the church from the very beginning, waiting for Jesus to come again to the world, hoping that He will come, knowing that He will judge the world when He comes.

In the midst of all of this Jesus tells His disciples "*Do not...*" (Luke 12:32) God cares for His people; He sees crises and cares for His people. He sees that they are only a few in face of so many big issues; He sees that they are weak when faced with overwhelming things; He sees that they are frightened when there are troubles around the corner. He reassures them; He has already given them everything they need; they have His kingdom in their hearts and that will equip them to face every crisis; will give them confidence to face down their enemies; will give them hope when the battle with evil seems to be lost; will give them courage when they are in danger. The Kingdom is in their hearts; it is God's gift to His people and they need not be afraid. Read the book of Acts, and see there what the disciples faced and see them bold, full of courage, unafraid!

Christianity in Scotland is at something of a crisis point; we are a "little flock!" and churches across the country are struggling; congregations are growing older and smaller; the number of ministers and other active church leaders is going down; money is becoming tight. Some churches are growing but they are few and far between and often they are growing at the expense of others! How do we face this crisis in church life? How do we face this crisis in a way that is based on our faith? Is this a time for despair or disappointment, blaming God for what He has not done? Afraid that the church will die? Or are we reassured by Jesus words: "*Do not...*" (Luke 12:32) Are these words just a pious soundbite to make us feel good? Or is this a genuine source of hope and reassurance that God has us in His hands; we have His kingdom in our hearts and the church may change but it will not die? So we keep on serving?

We made a big long list of things that make us afraid; being afraid is not always a crisis, but sometimes we feel not far short of it. How do we deal with all of these things on that list? We've had a great deal of thunder and lightning this week; my granny's response to thunder and lightning was to sit in her chair in the kitchen with tea towel over her head! I'm not sure how effective that would be, just blocking out something she didn't like; if she could not see it, it wasn't there! I'm not sure how good a strategy that is. How does faith help us deal with these crises that come along? Faith reminds us that God has put His kingdom in our hearts and with that gift comes all kinds of other gifts: faith, hope, courage, love; He is with us everywhere we

go. Faith reminds us to keep trusting Jesus even in the dark; it reminds us to keep walking in His ways, even when the path disappears!

Keep on! The servants were waiting, but not asleep; the servants were serving while waiting for their master. God has given us His kingdom; His kingdom is in our hearts. We love Him and trust Him; we serve Him and look to live in His ways – His kingdom is in our hearts. He has called us to be about kingdom business and to carry on being about kingdom business: to love the Lord with all our hearts; to live in the Lord's ways; to love others and care for those in need; to tell others about Jesus and share our faith; to serve Him in the world and do good for others. This is our calling; this is our business; we need to be about that business and keep going. Keep on!

"Do not be afraid!" Is that easier said than done? God has loved us; God has given us everything we need; Jesus promises to be with us everywhere we go; *"do not be afraid!"* He knows that we are small in the face of overwhelming odds; He knows that we are weak when things against us seem strong; He knows that often we feel we can't cope with things that make us afraid. *"Do not be afraid!"* because Jesus is with us everywhere we go.