

## **REFLECTION: 'Don't Let Fear Hold You Back' March 16<sup>th</sup> 2025**

In 1849, a man named Charles Blondin wanted to be the first person to cross the great Niagara Falls on a tightrope. After he had completed the crossing once, he then began to do the crossing with daredevil antics. He did it on a bicycle, on stilts, in the dark and even cooked an omelet in the middle of the tightrope. His amazing feats drew large crowds who would come to watch and see what he would try next.

One day, a large crowd had gathered, and he walked across the tightrope, blindfolded and pushing a wheelbarrow. When he reached the other side, the crowd's applause was louder than the Niagara Falls below. Blondin asked the crowd, 'Do you think I can do that again with a person in the wheelbarrow?' The crowd erupted 'Yes! Yes! Yes! You are the greatest. You can do anything.' And then Blondin asked for a volunteer. The crowd went silent. The story goes that no one volunteered.

Jesus drew a crowd by speaking about the reign of God. He talked about a radical way of living and being in God. It was a way that called for transformation, change and risk. As he taught then and as we hear his teachings today, we might call out 'Yes. You are the greatest. With you, we can do anything.' But Jesus calls us out of the crowd to get in the wheelbarrow. Do we become silent?

Fear is a perfectly natural emotion designed to help us recognise danger and respond appropriately, but this healthy emotion can turn into an unhealthy response that leads to aggressive or inappropriate behaviours.

Fear can hold power in our lives. The world of advertising takes advantage of our fears in order to convince us we need their product, and people in power can threaten our safety leading us to live cautious lives – our fears of failure, inadequacy, or being worthy limit the amazing things we might do. Eighty or so years ago fear was used by one group of people to manipulate their fellow citizens to do things which otherwise they would never have even considered. The world is still affected by the events of all those years ago. Fear is a very powerful weapon which has and is still used to oppress, destabilize, destroy and kill nations, communities, organisations and people.

In this week's gospel, the Pharisees come to warn Jesus of Herod's intent to kill him. There is a good reason to believe that this is very possible, as John the baptiser's death would have still been fresh in their minds. Perhaps the Pharisees in this story were motivated by fear, and these good people desired to help Jesus. Or maybe through the use of manipulation they were trying to trap Jesus in order to get rid of him. We can't know their motivations.

What we do know is how Jesus responded. Jesus had good reason to be afraid. No one would have blamed him for acting out of fear and protecting himself. But Jesus is focused on his mission and on God's agenda rather than any form of an attempt of mastery and control. Even though it may have been difficult for him to bear the rejection of so many beloved people, Jesus is on a mission and will not be deterred by the fear he may have felt inside. Jesus shows us, by example, that the antidote to fear is faith; faith born out of a deep love for his God and for all people.

We see Jesus responding to the warnings about Herod, indicating his understanding of his mission and the challenges he would face. He speaks with a sense of urgency and a focus on Jerusalem, recognising the danger that awaits him yet refusing to be deterred. Jesus embodies the courage to engage with the community, even amidst profound threats – one might even say to get into the wheelbarrow! However, this passage invites reflection on how we, too, can become silent or retreat into our safe spaces with our feet planted firmly on the ground when confronted with differing theologies and new ideas, often allowing fear to dominate our responses. Do we let fear hold us back? Is it fear that contributes to an

inability to see a positive future Is it fear that motivates or perhaps manipulates us to be wary of change from our familiar ways to how we've always done things?

Fear can be a powerful force in our lives. It can keep us safe from immediate danger but can also stifle growth, dialogue, and understanding there is hope in the expectation of a future. The modern world presents a complex web of beliefs, values, and narratives that can seem daunting, leading many to disengage rather than risk challenging conversations or potential conflict. When faced with opposing views or the unknown, people naturally gravitate toward comfort and familiarity—what we refer to as "safe spaces." These enclaves, while offering a sense of security, often limit our exposure to diverse thoughts and inhibit the rich dialogue that can come from engaging with other perspectives.

In the context of faith, fear manifests in various forms. For many followers of Christ there is a fear of being ridiculed or rejected when we step into conversations about our beliefs, especially with those who hold different views. This fear can be intensified by the rise of polarizing debates and the mischaracterization of religious beliefs in societal discourse. Sometimes I think we have lost the art of conversing with those who share different ideas. The idea of being challenged or countered can paralyze our willingness to share our faith openly or to engage authentically with others and remain friends after the exchange of ideas. It seems to me that we fall either into one category or the other and if you're the 'other' then you're on the other side. How would the disciples have accomplished what they did if they always stayed in the 'safe lane and never took a risk?'

However, silence in the face of fear is not a position Jesus modeled. His ministry was marked by a willingness to engage, provoke thought, and challenge societal norms. He confronted the existing religious structures and spoke to the marginalized. His prophetic voice reverberated across cultural and theological lines, advocating love, compassion, and truth. By rejecting apathy, and complacency and choosing to enter into the fray, Jesus set a precedent for his followers.

The call to communicate one's faith isn't only about proclaiming our beliefs, it's also about our relationships with others, understanding and the all-important connections we cultivate. In diverse communities, we are given the opportunity to learn and grow through conversations. Engaging with those who have different perspectives can enrich our understanding of our faith and provide opportunities for authentic relationships. It challenges us to defend our beliefs thoughtfully and respectfully, rooted in love rather than division.

To combat the silence induced by fear, we can cultivate a spirit of courage grounded in love and empathy. Recognising that most people, regardless of their beliefs, desired connection and understanding can help dismantle the barriers that a wall of fear erects. Engaging others in thoughtful discussions, listening actively, and sharing our experiences can serve as a pathway toward mutual respect and understanding.

Jesus calls us to step out of our comfort zones into the vibrant tapestry of life and faith. By finding the courage to engage with others, even in the face of fear, we not only honor the teachings of Christ but also enrich our own spiritual journey. The call is one of love, challenging us to speak boldly and listen deeply, becoming a community that celebrates diversity rather than shying away from it. Because of our fears of being rejected by family, friends, workmates, too often we remain silent, and in our safe spaces. It's with thanks to God because God stays with us, God doesn't abandon nor forsake us, God extends grace towards us, giving us the inner strength we lack to speak up when we can, using our hands, and actions to speak for us. Through Christ's love and the Spirit's power, we can achieve what seemed impossible. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson "Fear defeats more people than any other one thing in the world." Amen