

“Faith Trumps Fear” – Luke 12:32-40

Well, the Americans have outdone us again! You may recall that in our recent Federal election there seemed to be a bit of a division of strategies between fear and doom and gloom on the one hand and bright sunny hopefulness on the other. However, if you’ve been watching the political carnival going on in our southern neighbour you will surely have noticed that with their usual flair and exuberance the people of the USA have outdone us mightily with their abysmal rift between the two major political parties.

Over the past eleven months the reactions of many, including most of the media and serious political observers, have moved from “he’s got to be kidding!” as Donald Trump announced he would run for the office of President to “are you kidding me?!” as he won the nomination of the Republican Party. Even with his ever-increasing, although not necessarily intentional (but who could really know??) attempts to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory with unbelievable gaffes, that there remains a real possibility he could actually win the election to that esteemed office says – in my opinion at least – more about the American voter than it does about him.

The main thrust of his campaign has been based on hooking into the fear of people – fear about terrorism, fear about foreigners, fear about economic failure, fear about the American Empire collapsing. While the current debate rages over whether those fears are real or imaginary, the postulated dangers far-off or immanent, the reality is that using fear as a motivation to enlist the support or at least following of people is as old as humanity. That strategy may work due to many people having a natural tendency to see the worst in something, or at least to quickly move to a negative view. Language reinforces such a move, for example those who see things positively are tagged with the pejorative “PollyAnna” while those who see things negatively are given the more positive (ironic, isn’t it?) label of “realists.”

That phenomenon of jumping immediately to the negative is even evidenced in scripture and is demonstrated nicely by today’s text from Luke’s gospel. Now – and no looking at your cheat sheets – what is the one theme you remember from hearing the reading from Luke? I’m guessing that theme is represented by the closing words, “the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” Possibly you got hung up on the image of Jesus doing a “Break & Enter” at night. Or, if you couldn’t remember the exact words, you probably came away with the sense of needing to be careful, to be a bit tense, keep watching nervously over your shoulder because Jesus might badly surprise you at any moment.

At first glance we often come away from this little snippet of the gospel with a sense of foreboding, of possible dread. And that’s too bad, because that’s neither the flavour nor the intent of what was being said. Now I find Luke’s habit – not unlike the other gospel writers – of collecting bits of what Jesus said on different occasions and sticking them together to form one passage to be distracting at least. At worst – and I think this is one of the best examples of the worst – putting several distinct quotations together and offering the mix as one utterance from Jesus causes Jesus to sound a bit incoherent, and I believe Jesus was WAY too articulate to have come across as disconnected as this passage would have him be.

I think if we go back to the beginning of the passage, or back even further, we can start to see what the original key message was. Note that what we are looking at today is only part of a larger conversation Jesus was having with his disciples ... we are coming in towards the end of a long, long lecture. Last week, if hadn’t had to take a week off because of a parade, we would have looked at an earlier part of that lecture, the part in which someone from the crowd interrupted Jesus asking him to interfere in the economic affairs of a family, and Jesus turned his

request into a monologue about the need to consider one's relationship with God as being more important than worrying about material goods. Between that episode and this week's reading we have skipped over a chunk of the monologue, including the well-known expression, "consider the lilies of the field." That piece that we passed over ends just before today's reading with the phrase that inspired the hymn "Seek ye first the kingdom of God."

So, now we come to the beginning of today's reading, and what would you expect to be the opening phrase for a passage that is so often remembered as a dire warning of how you can expect to be suddenly confronted by Jesus? What you might well expect is definitely not what you get: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Wow! That is nothing like thieves in the night, nor sudden surprises, is it? "Do not be afraid." "Father's good pleasure." "Give you the kingdom." How much more positive and pleasant could it get?

How then is it that with such a positive opening, such a positive theme, we come away with not only fear but foreboding? There are many possible explanations, but I think the one that explains it best is the understanding that several different quotations have been glued together like a laminate here. If you look carefully at the text in the New Revised Standard Version of the bible, the one we use in the pews, you will note that the editors have deliberately put quotation marks at the beginning of verses 32, 35, and 39. These are a signal that each of these three mini-passages should be considered as separate units.

The three units can be identified as the opening theme of being granted the kingdom, along with an admonition to treat that gift with the respect it deserves; a middle piece that echoes the parable of the bridesmaids; and a closing admonition that nobody knows when this will ultimately happen. Note that the middle unit, the piece about the slaves waiting for the master from the wedding banquet, maintains the positive theme from the opening – the master invites the slaves/servants to sit down to a feast, and even serves them. No matter how late the arrival of the master – and there is a whole sermon on that theme alone, of a message to Luke's church who were beginning to wonder if the anticipated return of Jesus would ever happen – no matter how late the hour the servants will be blessed.

That troublesome third unit, the one that we come away remembering, seems to have been added to provide a balancing counter-theme, urging alertness to those who would claim that either Jesus isn't returning or that his return is so delayed that it doesn't matter if they "eat, drink, and be merry" in the meantime.

So with this understanding of this gospel passage, it is important for us to go back to the opening theme, to refresh our perspective with the introduction of "Fear not", "Do not be afraid", for this is good news – you will inherit the kingdom of God. That is the key message, the essence of what Jesus had to say to his disciples – to those who would follow him and live out his broader message – to you, and to me.

That broader message is also contained here in the opening words: sell your possessions, give alms; that is, focus on helping others, rather than helping yourself to the goodies. Live out his new commandment of loving God with all that you are and loving others as you have been loved. Be honest about what you treasure, because what's really important to you shows both what you believe and who you are.

What a contrast that is against an all-too-common emphasis in the church on the negative perspective of fearful legalism. We can only pray that all those who – "lovingly", of course – focus and concentrate on the fear of Jesus' return and judgment in order to coerce other believers into believing and behaving in a "proper" (in their rigid definition) way might instead hear the

important part of this message, to hear the promise of God's kingdom, to be not afraid. Do they consider that the promise is meaningless? Or that it is perhaps a trick of some kind, only to be cruelly snatched away capriciously or at the last moment? Or that God has motives other than loving his children? I don't know, because I can't understand that legalistic, fearful position. I hear instead a promise made by the only one who can truly fulfill promises, Christ our Lord, who through his own death and resurrection sealed that promise with his blood. I hear instead a litany of covenants honoured by God even when broken by people in sinfulness, spanning the ages and the testaments from the second issuing of the great commandments to the granting of grace to a humanity that had rejected his Son.

And I hear also the call to a way of life consistent with being granted such a gift as the kingdom of God – a way of life that calls for self-sacrifice, of reaching out in help to others who are in need of a good word, not dismissing them or shunning them or driving them away. I hear a call to a way of life that honours the goodness of God, and the sacrifice of Christ Jesus, and reflects the devotion of the disciples who first heard the call to follow him.

My prayer is that all within the church would, instead of focusing upon and fomenting the fear of the closing caution, would hear the admonition to fear not and live based upon the promise of reconciliation with God and the receiving of his kingdom, and to focus on that Good News. May God grant us the wisdom and strength to do so.