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*“Have courage for I am with you”*

We are all in the boat together!



Dear Friends,

As we emerge from lockdown and move through the amber stage, we see shops, restaurants and other community services opening having adjusted to the new measures. I can't help but notice the difference in how and what people are choosing to engage in. It leaves me pondering how people prioritize their movements, their contact with others, what's the driving force behind their actions?

Recently I had no choice but to act. I was in desperate need of a new pair of specs and having received my first real pay for three years I enquired at the local opticians unsure of the response I would receive. This wasn't an emergency, but my temporary repair was in danger of failing; I can't function without my specs you see. I got an appointment quickly and I was presently surprised by my visit. After adorning my mask and sanitizing, I alone entered the premises with two members of staff who were screened and wearing a visor. I felt so safe, in fact safer than previously when I had to enter a crowded waiting room.

It was an interesting experience. One member of staff passed frames through a screen for me to try and whilst doing so this person chatted. This member of staff appeared overly anxious (yet wore full PPE) appearing like a rabbit caught in the headlights. This person discussed nothing but the virus despite my trying to steer the conversation towards a different subject. In fact, they were totally obsessed. Quoting constantly the "what if" scenarios which just added to the anxiety which was clearly draining their energy, whilst the other person behind a screen appeared unfazed, calm, and relaxed. Now I know we don't always show our emotions, but I couldn't help wondering why some people are overly anxious and others not anxious at all. Maybe it's all about perspective and mindset.

I am not belittling anxiety by any means, both my sons suffer from it severely, this as part of their autism. I am well versed in diffusing and recognising it, indeed I too suffer with it. I think most of us do at some point. Fear is a natural emotion, it can be beneficial resulting in the "fight flight" response, but anxiety is different, in excess and unattended it is damaging, to one's wellbeing and those around us.

Fear seems to be a common theme in our readings today. Let's start by considering Matthew's gospel, keeping in mind that this was written at a time of persecution in the church. It begins with Jesus making or telling the disciples to enter the boat, the Greek word from the translation is "Enankasen" which means to compel, so Jesus compels them to enter the boat even though there is a perceived risk – the storm.

Then there's a sense that Jesus is far away on the shore almost absent from them, so maybe they feel fear. The storm exacerbates that fear and I wonder if they become anxious, they had been awake for many hours and were fatigued, anxiety thrives on fatigue.

The first-time fear is mentioned is in Jesus' response to Peter. The storm is dangerous so there may be some fear, but the storm is also familiar to them, they know what to expect from a storm. But Jesus walking towards them is unfamiliar, unexpected. Is this where the fear becomes anxiety?

We don't know if that's the case, but we do know we too are fatigued as we have been weathering the storm that is Covid for some time, but there is still a strong undercurrent that the storm could rage again. We do not know when calm will return, this is what is so challenging about Covid, the way it has affected our way of thinking and our anxiety levels.

In biblical terms the sea is the place where demonic forces live, and Jesus rises above the sea by walking above - the son of God has command over the evil sea. The Hebrew scriptures reveal that God walks or makes ways through water. Here Jesus is confirming his identity as Godly. I wonder what our evil waters are today - maybe it's this post Covid anxiety that we are experiencing.

Then there's that "if" word again, the word of doubt that breeds anxiety. It really does get Peter into some deep waters. As Peter walks out, he is weak and strong, he doubts but believes, he fears but has faith, he leaves a safe place for the unknown. Then the anxieties of the mind overtake him in the form of doubt, so he calls out. Peter's faith may be little, but it is bold.

What is Jesus' response, again the Greek translation is the word "tharseite" which means have courage, it is a word of reassurance and encouragement. Jesus says Peter has little faith, little faith is normal, its healthy, its human to have doubts, fears, and anxieties.

This theme of fear is mirrored in the Old testament where Elisha is also fearful, fleeing from the ruthless Jezebel. This fear turns to anxiety which leads to exhaustion, fatigue, and despair. Elijah is desperate, he too cries out to God. Elijah is filled with negative thoughts - isn't the world dreadful despite all my efforts he says. This is the same negativity that accompanies anxiety, any positive thoughts are eradicated from our memory, Elijah fails to remember the 100 prophets saved by Obadiah! The anxious mind is not a still mind, and a still mind cannot discern good thoughts from damaging thoughts. God orders Elisha to move forward, I wonder if he is reluctant to do so. God assures him of his presence, no longer can he stay in his cave.

Both stories bring up the issues of danger, fear, and faith. I wonder if this post lockdown anxiety is one of the biggest challenges for us as church. We all need to support each other, sometimes that may be by others compelling us to see the reality as it is, to help us restore some balance in our lives. Sometimes compassion is about being still and other times it's about shouting out.

Life is fragile, life is full of risk, but I suppose the question is are we going to let anxiety rob us of life's precious moments. The virus has left us completely vulnerable as a people and whilst we may have a little faith in the measures in place, we need to be bold for we know getting out and engaging with others is so beneficial to our wellbeing, it combats loneliness and isolation.

Some of us are still firmly in the boat, some of us are stepping out of the boat and others are at the shoreline. Some of us are still in our caves, and not by our own choice, but eventually we all must step forward. Let us have courage knowing we are not alone and together we can ride any storm set before us.

Love in Christ

Belinda