

## **St Gabriel's Family Communion, 12<sup>th</sup> Dec 2010**

**OT: Isaiah 35:1-10; NT: James 5:7-10**

**Gospel: Matthew 11:2-11**

H. A. Williams, one of the leading preachers and teachers in the Church of England, titled his autobiography, *'Someday I'll Find You.'* That may seem like an unusual title, but if you read the book, it begins to make sense. You see, there was a period in Dr. Williams' life when he was almost completely crippled by phobias.

He was afraid to go into the streets or the shops, afraid of lifts and escalators, afraid to ride on trains or buses or the underground, afraid of flying – you name it, he was scared of it! Eventually he became so overcome with fear that he was partially paralyzed, and it was only after years of psychotherapy and treatment that he was able to conquer his fears and get on with his life.

Fear is one of the most controlling emotions of life. Most of us don't like to think of ourselves as fearful people. We prefer to think of ourselves as strong and independent, but we know in our hearts that, that isn't really how it is. If we are truly honest with ourselves we know that none of us are "invincible," male or female. Every one of us, at one time or another has felt the cold grip of fear and helpless to do anything about it.

One of the leading spiritual writers of the 20th century was the late Henri Nouwen. He wrote, *"Fear is the single most important and tragic emotion in our lives."* I think he's absolutely right about that. Every day, people play on the fears of others, using it to manipulate them to achieve some desired goal, it could be anything from buying home safety products to voting for or against someone in an election. Fear is a powerful motivational tool. Who among us has not played the "what if" game with our fear? What if this happens? What if that happens? What if something happens and I'm not there to do anything about it? We play this ridiculous game over and over because fear is a controlling emotion.

We know that fear is powerful. But do we respect the fears of other people around us? Do we respect the fear of the child who cannot sleep without a night-light? ("It's just the dark. There's nothing to be afraid of there." Oh, really?) Do we respect the fear of those who are deathly afraid of spiders? What about people who live in constant fear

of losing their job, or their home or their marriage – do we respect those fears or do we brush them aside with some empty cliché?

The world is full of fears, and most of us, if we are honest about it, are forced to admit that there have been times in our lives when we were afraid – I don't mean a little bit scared. No, I'm talking about those times when we were truly, knee-knocking, dry-mouthed scared. We may or may not have been in a life-threatening situation, but we can all remember a moment frozen in time when we were gripped by an all-encompassing fear, a fear that blinded us to everything else around us.

I mention this because it is my belief that John the Baptist was in the grip of the kind of fear we've been talking about. Wouldn't you be afraid if you were alone in a cold, dark, damp prison cell, not knowing what's going to happen next, but intensely aware of the hostility your captor feels for you?

How did that fear affect John the Baptist? Did he wake up in the middle of the night, soaked with sweat, horrified by some nightmare of the fate that awaited him? Did he fear for the lives of those who followed him? How did he cope with it, get through it? Did he, perhaps, remember better days to help him get through these dark moments? If he did, surely one of those memories, perhaps the best memory, concerned the baptism of Jesus; that day must have been engraved permanently on his memory.

He had known at first glance that this was no ordinary man who had come to him for baptism. There was something different about this Jesus, something in the way he carried himself, some inexplicable something that told John that this man was special. Even from a distance, John could sense this. And when Jesus came near and John could look into those strange, compelling eyes, he knew that he was right – this was no ordinary man. This was the *"Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."* What was it John had said to Jesus? *"You want me to baptize you? I have the strangest feeling that it ought to be the other way around."* Still he had insisted, and John had baptized him there in the River Jordan, in front of God and everybody. And then John had heard – or at least, he THOUGHT that he had heard – that voice saying, *"This is my Son! I am so proud of Him!"*

It hadn't been that long ago, really. But so much had happened since then. John had heard stories about Jesus, stories of how he was preaching and teaching and doing miraculous things. But life had gone on for John, and he had been very busy himself.

He had his own work to do, his own mission to carry out. And now he had been arrested and thrown into prison. He had no money to hire someone to defend him in court and no hope of parole either. After all, John had said some pretty hard things about Herod, and now he found himself at his mercy. He must have feared for his very life, and fear clouds the mind.

Do you know what else fear does? It eats away at your confidence – not just your self-confidence, but your confidence in everything and everyone! Could that have happened to John? Even though he had seen in Jesus of Nazareth the promised Son of God; even though he had heard with his own ears the heavenly proclamation, "This is my Son!" did he wonder, in those moments of intense fear, if it could really be true?

Is it possible that John's doubt was not directed at Jesus, but at himself, at his own ability to think and reason – his mind clouded by fear? If what John believed was true—that Jesus was God's Son, he had no reason to worry about the future. So, when he was allowed to have a visitor, John sent a messenger to Jesus to ask this question: *"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"* Perhaps seeking to settle those fears.

I think it's important to notice how Jesus answered John's question. Notice first some things Jesus did NOT say. For example, Jesus did not say, *"What sort of question is that? You know who I am."* Jesus did not say, *"Well, if you don't know, I'm not going to tell you."* Jesus did not say, *"Okay, I'm going to go over this one more time. You might want to write this down, John."* Jesus did not say, *"You better believe I am! I'm the man! God chose me! I'm number one!"*

No. What Jesus said was, *"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."*

The significance of Jesus' reply to John is that he points NOT to himself and says, *"Look what I've done,"* BUT that he points to God and says, *"Look what God is doing through me."* The prophet Isaiah had predicted what God would do, what the coming of the kingdom of God would look like. He said, *"The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy"* (Isaiah 35:5-6). Everything Jesus is doing points to the presence of God.

So Jesus said to John, in essence, *"You see what's happening, John. Do you think God is at work in my ministry? Do you believe these signs are the fulfillment of God's ancient promise? If you do, then I'm your man. If not, maybe you should keep on looking."*

Even after 2000 years, with so much history and tradition to draw from, there are still those among us who ask Jesus, *"Are you the One who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"* During this season of Advent, we wonder as we wander, *"Who is this One we proclaim and anxiously await?"* How do we know that the One we follow is the Promised Saviour? Is Jesus the One we see reflected in the worship of the church? Can we see Jesus in the gathering of the people of God, in the hymns and liturgies and prayers of the worship service? Is he the One, or should we wait for another?

What about you? Do you believe God is at work in Jesus? Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God? Do you believe that the Jesus of story and song and scripture is the One who is indeed the Promised saviour of God, the One who comes to make a real difference in the world we know?

If you can answer yes to these questions, I have another question for you: who do you say Jesus is? Is he for you *Emmanuel*, God with us? And if he is, do you tell others what you see? How are you letting your faith, your belief, show in the way you live?" *"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"* Jesus is the One we are to receive today and to offer to others. Jesus is the reason we are in church today. Only the God revealed through Jesus can satisfy our hunger and calm our fears. There will be no other.

As we move a little closer day by day towards the celebration of the birth of Jesus my prayer for you is that your eyes will be opened anew to the signs and wonders of God in your life and in this church. May you be blessed with God's love and grace in everything you do. AMEN