

Rev'd Emily's Sermon – Sunday 5th May 2024

Sixth Sunday after Easter

Readings:

Acts 10: 44-48

John 15: 9-17

Yesterday, May the 4th is celebrated as 'Star Wars Day' when Star Wars fans exchange the greeting; 'May the 4th be with you!' So it would be rather remiss of me to not begin without quoting the little green religious sage in Star Wars, known as 'Yoda' who says: 'Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate and hate.....leads to suffering.'

You do not have to be a fan of Star Wars to understand that the 'Dark Side' is a path that leads away from the light and away from the goodness of God.

Why Fear? Because Fear, I believe is the opposite of love.

In our gospel reading, Jesus proclaims this message, which is the very heart of the Good News, 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down ones life for one's friends.' God himself loves us and cares for us and wants us to do likewise.

Once upon a time, when large predators roamed the earth, we relied on fear to protect us from things that could eat us. Fear is a natural response to danger. When we are afraid, our own personal alarm system sounds and a small part of our brain that is shaped like a walnut called the 'amgdala' sends out the necessary chemicals to allow us to respond appropriately. We either respond by fighting our way out of the situation, or we run away. This response is known as 'fight or flight.'

Sadly, however, we have become accustomed to a world in which sometimes, there is no danger, but we are told, perhaps by our media and others around us and in positions of influence, that there is. Immigrants, Gay people, black people, protest marches, other countries, are some of the things presented as clear and present dangers, but fear is more insidious than this, even. Witness advertising and the 'fear of missing out.' We are constantly bombarded by messages telling us we are too fat, too thin, we need this diet, this supplement, this makeup, we look too old, anti-ageing, you're missing this party, why weren't you invited, perhaps it's because you don't have this outfit.... the list goes on and on and on.

So, it is no surprise that a system that was supposed to protect us, can now not tell the difference between a real danger and threat or a lie that seeks to prevent us from opening our hearts to others and laying down our lives for our friends.

Going right back to the start of the bible, we might be able to see that the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden was caused by a serpent of fear. The serpent insinuated to Eve that she was missing out on something. That she was not good enough as she was. That life could be even better if she just ate this one fruit. We know what happened after and it wasn't the happy ending she expected. I don't know if you've ever bought something that you really REALLY wanted..... but what usually happens when you have your heart's desire? You don't want it any more and move on to the next thing you think you really, really need.

Fear constricts our minds and our hearts into believing that 'I' am the centre of my own universe and that my preservation and how I am viewed by the world matters above everyone else. That I must protect myself at all costs. I read in horror the comments on a facebook post the other day following a stabbing, in which bystanders filmed the incident. One person had courageously asked in the comments section, why the people filming had not intervened. The following commentators said 'why would you intervene?!' and proceeded to comment that there was no way they would do so if it meant they would lose their lives or be injured. Quite a lot of them said they had families and would consequently not put themselves at risk. Another example in which we cannot now tell truth from reality is with immigration. We are told they are 'Illegals.' We are constantly bombarded by stories about them and they are never positive. We are told we have no room. They are scroungers, even though by home office guidance they cannot work.

They are dirty, they are all young males, they are criminals. They are dangerous. But they are also our surgeons. Our accountants, our care workers and our fruit pickers. They are people just like we are. Greater love has no man than this that we lay down 'me' and think instead about 'we.'

Love requires courage and the constant sacrifice to step out of our own lives and care about others, not just ourselves and our needs. To see humanity as God sees it, even 'the worst' and not to walk by on the other side of the road, especially when everything within us tells us to run away. Love requires constant hard work in a world that tells us that we should be constantly afraid. Love your neighbour? My neighbour is just the person who lives next door. Our hearts must be 'enlarged daily' we must fight for it. We must lay down our lives for it. The 'dark side' leads to anger, to fighting a danger that doesn't really exist, it leads to a suffering that is claustrophobic and greedy. It tells me that I must have because there is not enough to go around. So, I will acquire more and more until I have far more than I need and then I will keep it all for myself because I deserve it and they don't. Love tells me that I have all that I need in the love of my neighbour and myself. It tells me that I am enough just as I am. It tells me that there is enough love to go round for everyone. At the moment when Jesus died on the cross, the veil in the temple separating God from the people was torn in two.

The truth that we must live by as followers of Christ then, is this: that there are no fences and borders that can keep love out. Not even our own.

Fear puts up walls and barbed wire. It is His Love that we show to the world around us, that will tear them down.