

Year C Proper 14

Luke 12:32-40

How worried are you this morning? After all there is much to fear, isn't there? The western world exists under the spectre of terrorism. The recent Referendum has made many fearful of their job security, their ability to work and move around freely in Europe, their pensions and so on. What about global warming and the still present threat of a nuclear calamity? Will our grandchildren have a planet to live on?

Fear is not a new concept. There was plenty of fear about in first century Palestine as well and so when Luke sat down to compose his Gospel he remembered stories about Zechariah, Mary, the Shepherds, Simon Peter, Jairus and the disciples generally, which had as their core message; do not be afraid. So the Gospel text this morning, continuing the Lukan theme, opens with the imperative; “Do not be afraid, little flock”.¹ Then rather surprisingly the passage goes on to describe the second coming of Christ in terms which are guaranteed to frighten the

¹ Luke 12:32 NRSV

life out of us! He'll come like a thief in the night. You might be up half the night waiting for the burglar but the moment your head hits the pillow and you're in the land of nod he'll be in your house. How strange! I remember visiting an elderly woman on the Isle of Skye the day after her husband had died. She wasn't a member of my congregation. She attended another Presbyterian denomination renowned for their particularly strict teaching. She was coping well with the loss of her husband and she had clearly prepared herself well for his death. However when I mentioned her

church and the support that she would find there she broke down in tears. She was petrified about the funeral because she would have to set foot in the church; she hadn't attended for quite some time because it was clear to her that her life was not good enough and she was living under God's condemnation. After trying to tease out from her what she thought she had done to cause such a fracture in her relationship with God, it became apparent that she was a quiet, peace loving lady who had hurt no-one. It was year after year of condemnatory preaching from when she was a little girl that

had broken her heart. Jesus was coming back again and she was convinced that would lead to her eternal damnation. But what did Jesus say? “Do not be afraid, little flock.” He meant it and so we need to take those words seriously as we seek to understand this passage of Scripture.

Jesus said do not fear because the Father is delighted to give us the kingdom. It is important to pause for a moment and ask the important question; what is the kingdom? Through the course of my ministry I have found that this is the one

concept that causes more confusion and misunderstanding than any other in the New Testament. That is serious because the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, and both concepts are the same, are central to what Jesus is all about. If we misunderstand them then we're going to get the message wrong. First, the kingdom of God does not refer to a place. We can speak of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and we can picture the country on the map of the world. We cannot do that with the kingdom of God because it never refers to a location, to a place.

Therefore it does not refer to heaven if you consider heaven to be a place; not everyone understands the word 'heaven' the same way. Likewise the kingdom of heaven does not refer to a place. Both phrases refer to the rule of God exercised by, in and through Jesus. The kingdom refers to God's rule; his governorship, his authority. So when Jesus speaks of the kingdom being given to us he is referring to the freedom granted to us to live under his rule. Second, his rule is not deferred. It is not something that we are awaiting. It has begun already because Jesus has been raised, he has ascended, he

has been vindicated and he is enthroned. As a result of this it is important that we acknowledge that situation and live in the light of it.

So what does that mean? How do we respond to this wonderful gift of the kingdom? Well, it might be helpful to try and answer these questions by highlighting what we mustn't do because we're very liable to fall into traps. Sometimes we might feel that a mark of our effectiveness is our busyness. It's good to be part of a busy church, filled with parish programmes and activities,

appealing to a wide range of ages and types. A busy church is vibrant and attractive and so in the pursuit of that goal we work hard. Sometimes we might thrive on all the activity and then on other occasions we might grow tired and maybe even become disillusioned. It is interesting that Jesus never told his disciples to stay busy but instead he instructed them to rely on the fact of Jesus' coming and to wait for that day living generously.² Sometimes we might feel that as a result of being gifted the kingdom we should sit tight and protect what we have

² Bartlett D. & Taylor, B eds. 2010 Feasting on the Word Year C Vol. 3 WJK Press p.336

been given. Let's build an exclusive community and invite others to come and join us and fit into our kingdom ways. If they don't want to come, well that's their look out. Jesus is coming back and they'll have to answer to him. I wonder if you are familiar these traits? They're flawed because they fail to recognise that the less we want to have the less we need to fear and the less we need to fear the more we can give and the more we can give the more we will receive. It is the motivation behind our actions that is the key to how we live and to how we will understand our calling in Christ. We are

given the kingdom therefore live under the rule of Christ by living as light to this world and giving to the poor. Instead of looking at ourselves and what we are doing or not doing we need to be looking out at the need around us and doing our best to meet it. Any retreat inwards in a well intentioned attempt to protect what we think we have got will mean we will lose it.

At the centre of the Gospel reading this morning is the image of the master arriving to serve the servants a wonderful meal. The prospect of the unscheduled arrival should

not breed fear but instead should allow us to really look forward to God's abundant blessings. What would happen if we really left the future up to God? That's the challenge of this passage of Scripture. God is not coming in Christ to condemn us but to invite us to his banquet and he's serving it up.

“Who among us could live without computers? It seems they're everywhere – in our studies at home, on our desks at work, in the library, the bank and even the cafe.

We get pleasure from them, we swear at them, we need them.

But it's only a recent thing. Just 3 generations ago the Chairman of IBM declared there is a world market for only five computers. As recently as 1977 the President of Digital Equipment claimed there is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home!

The revolution was brought to us in large part by Steven Jobs, the founder of Apple Computers. Steve Jobs was just 21 when he and Steve Wozniak invented the Apple Computer. Until then computers were a

monstrous mass of vacuum tubes which took up whole rooms. Then the two Steve's managed to take that mass of tubes and incorporate them inside a box small enough to sit on a desk.

Jobs and Wozniak offered their invention to Atari. They weren't interested in big bucks – all they wanted was a salary and the opportunity to continue their work. Atari knocked them back. They offered it to Hewlett-Packard, but Hewlett-Packard knocked them back. It seemed Jobs and Wozniak alone could see the possibilities. So Jobs sold his Volkswagon and Wozniak sold

his calculator, and with the \$1300 that gave them, they formed Apple Computers. The company was named Apple in memory of a happy summer Jobs had spent working in an orchard.

The rest is history. By all accounts Steve Jobs was a visionary, and spurred on by that vision he built a successful computer company. But Jobs soon discovered that if his vision was to reach fruition they needed greater management expertise. So Jobs approached John Sculley, then President of PepsiCo. There was absolutely no reason why Sculley should leave a highly paid

position in a world leading company to go work with a bunch of computer nerds in a fledgling industry. Not unsurprisingly he turned Jobs down. But Jobs wouldn't take no for an answer. He approached Sculley again. Again Sculley turned him down. In a last ditch effort Jobs passionately presented his visionary ideas to Sculley and he asked Sculley a question that forced him to accept. The question was this: "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?"

“Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?” Indeed Jobs and Sculley did change the world.

Jesus comes to us with the same question: “Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?” Most of us spend our lives making sugared water, going to work to accumulate more possessions and perhaps finding space for God and the world in our spare time. But Jesus had a vision to

change the world.”³ As we unite ourselves with his vision, the kingdom, so he will come and take us to his banquet.

³ <http://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/kingdom-of-god/>