

Now may I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let me seek to engage your brain with a bit of word association. Keep the answers to yourselves but what words pop into your mind when I say I want you to think of the opposite to young, smooth, happy, cold, new, fear. I reckon that if we did a survey and I read your minds there'd be a very high agreement of the first five of those words and their opposites. But there might be a bit more divergence about the last one, fear. And there's a lot of fear in our readings today. Our Old Testament lesson begins with God saying to Abraham, "Do not be afraid." So you can assume that Abraham was afraid. He was afraid that the promise that he'd received about being the father of many nations would not be fulfilled.

And the Psalmist begins the Psalm by asking, "The Lord is my light, whom then shall I fear?" Then in the Gospel readings, we see a complete absence of fear. The fearsome Pharisees warned Jesus that, "Herod is after you," they say. "He wants to kill you." Jesus says, "Tell that fox, there's no way I'm leaving town." He showed no fear. But I reckon that there's none of us here who could honestly say that we know no fear. I had a great lesson in fear on Wednesday. I went to Borrego Springs to look at the flowers, which were magnificent. That wasn't scary. What was scary was the way we got there because we flew in a very small plane, thanks to somebody's kindness. I don't like flying anyway but getting into this very, very small plane was terrifying. It was like getting to Borrego by lawnmower.

It reminded me of a story I heard this week of a photographer assigned to national magazine and he was tasked with going to take a picture of a fire. So he arrived at the air strip an hour before sundown, wasn't much time left so he rushed to a plane, he saw a small Cessna plane and he jumped in with his equipment and said, "Right, let's go!" The pilot was a rather tense looking young man, turned his plane into the wind and soon they were in the air flying erratically. "Fly over the north side of the fire," said the photographer, "and make several low-level passes." "Why?" asked the nervous pilot. "Well, because I'm going to take pictures," said the photographer. "I'm a photographer and photographers take pictures." And the pilot said, "What, so you're not the instructor?"

There's truth in what it says in Proverbs, "A person's fears set a trap for failure." Or as Wayne Smith paraphrases it, "Fear sabotages success because when we don't try we can't succeed." And if we went around the church this morning, we could come up with a long list of fears. It wouldn't just be me putting flying on the list. Spiders, snakes, loneliness, illness, death, redundancy, commitment, the unknown, we all know about fear. The King David, writer of the psalm, lists in Psalm 27, which we've just said, the things we feared. Violence, war, abandonment, isolation, and if you look at the other psalms you'll see that, that list of things of which to be fearful is long. So David was something of an expert in fear. So I want to look at his psalm, Psalm 27, in a bit more detail and see what advice it can give us on how to deal with fear.

And I think David can answer our question of what is the opposite of fear. Look at his verse three of the psalm, "Though an army should camp against me yet my heart shall not be afraid and though wars should rise up against me, yet I will put my trust in Him." The opposite of fear isn't boldness or recklessness, it's trust and that's echoed throughout the Bible. The prophet Isaiah says, "I will trust and not be afraid." And in Proverbs, that verse I read, the beginning of the second verse, the second part of the verse says, this, "A person's fears set a trap for failure but one who trusts in the Lord is secure." So what David is encouraging is a move from fear to trust, which as we all know is easier said than done. David knew that. He knew that life is always full of things to fear.

As one writer puts it, "Fear lurks around any imaginable corner. It threatens to poison your inner peace and outward poise. It watches for your most vulnerable moment and picks the lock that safeguards your security. Once inside the vault of your soul, it strikes quickly to transform spiritual muscle into mental mush." The question David is addressing in his psalm isn't, will I ever be afraid? Rather it's how will I handle the fears that come my way? And he does seem to have learnt how to handle his fear as he puts his trust in God. David learned to trust. How did he do that? Well, he learned to put his trust in God. He learnt who to trust. It wasn't an abstract lesson. So he didn't so much learn to trust as he learned to trust in God. The psalm begins, "The Lord is my light, whom shall I fear?" He didn't just have an abstract trust. He didn't trust in himself, he didn't trust in his own wisdom, experience or belief or in his notion of truth.

He put his trust in the Lord. He learned to trust a person not a concept and as he did that his fear receded. He calls God his rock, his refuge, his hiding place. And when I've preached on that before I often tell the congregation about the island called Lindisfarne, or Holy Island off the north coast of England, which is a few miles out into the ocean and you can walk there some of the time. The tide comes in faster than a rushing horse, that's what they like to say. And so people are always getting caught out there so they built along the way out there these, well, they're sheds on pedestals really and so if you see the tide coming in you have to climb up the ladder and wait it out in one of these sheds. And you're there for hours so it's the kind of mistake you only make once but at least you're safe and don't get swept away in the tide.

That's part of what David's talking about here but not everything. The language and imagery he's using is more personal than simply a refuge, a shed on sticks. It's more like something I saw in the news once. It was one of those all too familiar scenes of a sniper shooting down a street in a war-torn city and there was a child wandering in the streets, scared and distraught. And all of a sudden, a woman, presumably the child's mother, rushed into the street, scooped up the child and hurried them away. And the child stopped crying and you could imagine the mother saying to the child, whispering in its ear, "It's okay. It's okay, you're safe. I've got you." And clearly it wasn't okay and it wasn't safe because the sniper was still shooting away but as far as the child was concerned, the situation was transformed as they were swept up in the arms of their mother.

And that's closer to the experience that David knew. He trusted God to keep him safe in his shelter, hidden in the secrecy of his dwelling. It's similar to the image in the Gospel where Jesus talks of desiring to gather his people under his wing as a hen protects her chicks. That's a magnificent image of safety, a place of trust and security. That's what David knew as he put his trust in God, that was something of his experience of being enveloped by God. There's a great story of trust in the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament and you may remember the story of King Nebuchadnezzar and he puts three godly men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, into the fiery furnace for refusing to worship the golden statue. And before the door to the furnace is closed, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego say to the King, "Oh, Nebuchadnezzar, we don't need to defend

ourselves if the God in whom we trust delivers us from the fire. Let him deliver us but if not please know that we'll never worship your statue."

In other words, their trust wasn't in the outcome. They weren't trusting that they'd be unscathed, that they'd walk out of the furnace. They weren't trusting that God would save them. They were trusting that God would work his purposes out. Their trust was in the who, not the what of their situation. They trusted that God was with them in their situation and as they did that they learnt to trust in God. And that's the task before us, to put fear aside and to learn to trust in God. And maybe to help us with that, we could take the words of the psalm and make them our prayer, "Though an army should camp against me, yet my heart shall not be afraid and though wars should rise up against me, yet will I put my trust in Him." The words of the psalmist can become our words. We, like David, can learn to trust in God more and more.

And by so doing, we'll get less and less like the African antelope called the Impala. I want to close by telling you why this is the case. An impala can jump apparently 25 feet in the air but it can be kept at a zoo behind a three foot wall. The reason being an impala won't ever jump if it can't see where its feet are going to land. So given that it can't see over a three foot wall, it's forever trapped behind a wall over which it could very easily jump. It's hemmed in by fear and uncertainty because an impala can't trust where its feet will land. So let's not live in prison-like impalas. Let's be more like David and move from fear to trust.

Amen.