

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

Let me seek to engage your brain in this sermon with a bit of word association. I'm going to say a few words, and you, in the quietness of your own mind, keep your answers to yourselves, but think about what word pops into your mind. What's the opposite of the words I'm about to say to you?

Young. Smooth. Happy. Cold. New. Fear.

I reckon that if we did a survey, there'd be a very high degree of agreement as to what the opposite of those first five words were, but we might have a variety of opinion when it came to the last one, fear.

There's a lot of fear in our readings today. Our Old Testament lesson begins, "The Word of the Lord came to Abraham. 'Do not be afraid.'" I think it's safe to assume that in that reading, that Abraham was afraid. He was afraid of the promise that he'd been given, that he'd be the father of many nations, won't be fulfilled. He was afraid that he'd remain childless. The Psalmist begins the psalm that we sang today, Psalm 27, by asking, "The Lord is my light; whom, then, shall I fear?" Then, in the Gospel reading, we have a complete absence of fear. The Pharisees warned Jesus that King Herod is out to get him, but Jesus says, "Tell that fox there's no way I'm leaving town." No fear there.

Jesus showed no fear, but I reckon that there's none of us here who could honestly say that we have no fear, that there's nothing of which we're afraid.

On my first Sunday here, I shared that I'd tried and failed to get in the sea at Windansea Beach, and I'm ashamed to say that all these weeks later, I still haven't been in the ocean ... Because after that sermon, people came up to me, phoned me, emailed me, and told me about currents, riptides, surfers, pollution, seals and their excrements, the cold water, stingrays, and a story of a shark in the cove. I've gone from thinking, "I should really get my swimming trunks on and have a nice dip in the sea" to thinking, "How does anyone get out alive?"

Which proves the truth of Proverbs 29:25 -- "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." In our opening hymn, we sang, "From the fears that have bound us, free our hearts to faith and praise." For many of us, we feel our hearts are bound by fear. If we go round the church, we could come up with a whole long list of fears and things to be afraid of. Spiders, snakes, loneliness, illness, death, redundancy, commitment, the unknown. My mother would add flying. I hope you'll join me in praying that that's a fear she'll be able to overcome.

Actually, I found out this week that my mother listens to these sermons on the computer, so bear with me a moment. I want to say, hi, Mum! The people here are very nice, and you should come in January and February. This is a good time to come, the months they laughably call "winter."

King David, the writer of the psalm, lists in Psalm 27 in these verses and the verses that we didn't sing the things he feared: violence, war, abandonment, isolation. If you look at the rest of the psalms he wrote, you could add to that long list. King David was familiar with fear. He could write about lots of things that he was afraid of. I think he's worth looking at, David, to how we address this issue of fear that we all face. He can give us some good advice.

I'll look at this psalm in more detail. The first thing he can do is he can answer our question about what the opposite of fear is. If you look at verses 3 and 4, "Though an army should encamp against me, yet my heart shall not be afraid, and though war should rise up against me, yet I will put my trust in him." The opposite of fear, according to David, isn't boldness or recklessness or strength or courage. It's trust. That's echoed throughout the Bible. Isaiah the prophet says, "I will trust and not be afraid." That verse from Proverbs I read concludes like this: "A person's fears set a trap for failure, but one who trusts in the Lord is secure."

What David is encouraging us is to move from fear to trust, which, as we all know, is easier said than done. As one writer put it, "Fear lurks around every imaginable corner. It threatens to poison your inner peace and outward poise. It watches for your most vulnerable moments, then 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 isn't

"Will I ever be afraid," but "How will I handle the fears that come my way," because they're coming our way. David knew that.

David does seem to have learnt throughout his life. We see in his writings that he learnt how to handle his fears and how to put his trust in God. He seems to have been able to make that move from fear to trust. David learnt to trust. How did he do that? Well, he learnt what to put his trust in, or rather, he learned who to put his trust in. The psalm begins, "The Lord is my light, whom shall I fear?" He didn't trust in himself, his beliefs, in his notion of truth. He put his trust in the Lord. He learned to trust a person, not a concept. He calls God his rock, his refuge, his hiding place.

When I've preached on this theme before, I've often talked about a place called Lindisfarne, or Holy Island, in the north of England, that some people might know about. It's a very holy place. It's about a mile off the coast. You can only get there at low tide, because at high tide, the sand is covered by the sea. You have to time your walk to Holy Island well, and if you don't, you have to use huts that have been put along the way, because to save pilgrims being washed away, over the years, people have built some sheds on stilts that are along the causeway. If the tide starts coming in, you have to climb up the ladder and wait eight to 12 hours or so for the tide to go out, and you can come back out of your refuge. It's better than the alternative.

That isn't quite what David is describing here. That's a refuge, but it's not quite what David's got in mind, because the language and the imagery he uses is much more personal. It's more like something I saw on the news once. It was that all too familiar scene of a war-torn city and gunmen firing down the streets, and a child wandered into view, screaming, isolated from its parents. Then came into view a woman who I presume was the child's mother, scooped up the child, and held it, and the child calmed down. You can imagine the mother saying, "It's okay, it's okay." From the child's point of view, it was okay, but in a way, the situation was still the same. They were still being shot at in a war-torn city, but somehow that experience of being scooped up in its mother's arms transformed the experience of the child. That's closer to what David is talking about in this instance. That's his experience. It's

that experience which helps him to trust God in his situation.

He talks of trusting God and God keeping him safe in his shelter, hidden in the secrecy of his dwelling. Jesus, in the Gospel, talks about how he longed to gather his people like a hen protects her chicks under her wing. That's the imagery David's familiar with. That's what he experienced. That's what he knew as finding trust in God.

I was preaching on Daniel 3 on Wednesday at the 12:00 service, and for those of you who don't know, there's a great service in the chapel, lovely service, at 12:00 every week. The reading on Wednesday was Daniel 3, and there's a wonderful illustration of trust there which I want to pass on. You may remember the story. There was a very evil king, King Nebuchadnezzar, and he put three very Godly men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, into the fiery furnace because they wouldn't worship the golden statue which he'd built. Just before the door to the furnace was closed, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego said this 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 golden statue." In other words, they didn't trust the outcome.

It wasn't that they trusted God would do what they wanted God to do in their situation. They trusted God, the light of their salvation. They trusted that the God in whom they felt secure would work his purposes out, whatever those purposes were. Their trust was in the who, not in the what, of their situation.

I'm conscious that you might be thinking, "Well, it's all well and good, this, for these Old Testament characters, they could trust God, but how can it happen for us today? How could we make that move from fear to trust? That's a good question. It's a question that always needs to be asked of preachers, because I can otherwise write all these platitudes, but what does it mean? How do we actually learn how to make that move?"

I was thinking about this, and I thought about my own experience, because I am, at this very moment, struggling at overcoming my fear of driving on the

wrong side of the road. That's something that's preoccupying me. "What parallels," I thought, "Can I apply from overcoming that fear to overcoming these fears?" ... Because there are parallels. When I'm driving, I'm taking it all very slowly. At the moment, I'm just [pootling 00:12:32] around La Jolla, so you have been warned. I haven't started yet ... I've only had a brief flirtation with the freeway, which is completely terrifying. I'm working up to spending more time on the freeway. I've had a lesson with an instructor. I'm reading a book I'm sure you're all familiar with. I hope you know it all of by heart, The Californian Driver Handbook. That's proving to be very helpful.

So it is, as we learn to put our trust in God. We learn to put it. It wasn't that these Old Testament characters, something magical happened to them, that all of a sudden, they could trust God. They learned to put their trust in God. We can learn to trust as we learn to drive. There are parallels. We start with small things. We build up our confidence. There's a book we can use. I think the Psalms are extremely helpful. They're a great resource for us as we turn to God and pray to Him and ask that He would help us to build up our trust in Him.

We can make the words our own. Just take the psalm we've looked at today, Psalm 27. Those verses I've read already: "Though an army should camp against me, yet my heart shall not be afraid, and though the war," or we could put whatever we're afraid of. We can insert our own word there. "Though the whatever should rise up against me, yet will I put my trust in Him." That's a prayer we can make our own. Those are words we can use as we turn to God and ask Him to help us learn to trust Him.

As we do that, our hope is that, like King David, we can learn to trust God more and more, and by doing so, will be less and less like the African antelope called the impala. I want to close by telling you why this is the case, why I don't want any of us to be like impalas. I don't know if you know what I'm talking about, the little African antelopes. You see them in zoos, you see them on the nature programs. They're amazing creatures. They can jump about 25 feet in the air. If you see them in a zoo, you'll see them behind a three-foot wall, which they could easily nip over, but they never do. The reason an impala never jumps over a three-foot wall is that impalas never jump where they can't see their feet

will land. If you build a wall that's three feet high that they can't see over, they're stuck. They won't take that risk and jump over the fence. They're hemmed in by their fear and their uncertainty. They're unable to trust.

Let's not live like impalas. Let's be more like King David. Let's make that move with him from fear to trust. Amen.