

Sermon preached in Iona Abbey 10.30am Easter Day 2014, by Revd. Joanna Anderson

A few years ago, when I was working in Northumberland, there was a serious incident in the city of Newcastle in which a gunman shot a policeman in the face and then went on the run. He headed for a place where he had often gone as a child, a small town on the edge of the National Park. He evaded the capture for almost a week and in the end, surrounded by heavily armed police, took his own life. The effects of this incident not only shook that small town profoundly but were felt all over the area. Even an hour away, on the streets of the town where I was working, you could sense the fear, while he was still on the run, (he had connections there)...there was - a caution/ a looking over the shoulder/ a fearful wondering about what would happen next. Fear was in the very air we breathed that week.

I wonder what you are most afraid of? I wonder what it is that really scares you? I'm not talking things that go bump in the night or even the spider making its springy way across the carpet towards your feet (though both of those can raise a shudder - at least in me!)

No..... what I wonder is, what are you really afraid of? Could it be that what you are most afraid of is dying or death itself?

Could it be the threat of global warming and the effect on this precious planet and generations of creation yet to come? Or maybe you fear that humanity will one day blow everything to smithereens? Perhaps your fear is of suffering some terrible, slow, degenerative disease, either physical or mental?

Perhaps what you fear most is losing face, or losing your position among the people you most admire, the people who make you feel good about yourself? Or, do you fear for your loved ones, lest they be caught in some catastrophe? Do you fear losing your job, or not having enough money to get by, to live on? Maybe you fear for a friend who is suffering, or you fear that your familiar world is under threat?

Or perhaps you are afraid to face up to yourself and the mess you know is inside and you fear losing control or letting go ?

Fear is part of being human, part of our world just as fear was a reality in the world of Jesus's time. There always has been, and there always will be, much for humans to fear. And fear makes us protect ourselves and our interests, our property and the interests of those we most love and value. Fear makes us set ourselves up in opposition to that which we fear. It can cause us to pour derision, scorn or blame on others, to demonise them in order to keep whatever is feared at bay, distanced from us.

Was it largely the fear of Jesus and all he spoke about and taught and did that brought about his end? Was it that the powers- that- be, both secular Roman supremacy and the religious

Temple authorities, feared Jesus's affect upon the people - especially the most demoralised in the population, the poorest and the most marginalised, those who had lost so much to the greed of empire, that they had nothing to lose? Was the Jesus effect too destabilising for the rulers and the establishment to maintain their positions, their places, their power, their tight control and order?

Was it fear that led to yet another brutal crucifixion? Fear that sought to bring an end to this man and his band of followers, with his claims to Lordship that rightly could only belong to Ceasar? If it was fear, then something astounding happened, because this time, fear and death did not have the last word. The two women who went to the tomb that morning - in a resurrection proclamation wonderfully written by the writers of Matthew's Gospel to heighten the tension and fear - (first there's an earthquake, then a being of startling light and brightness that caused the burley Roman soldiers to faint clean away!) - the two women knew what fear was and yet twice they were told clearly, in this resurrection proclamation, - "Do not be afraid". The being of light, the angel, said it and when they encountered Jesus that was his message too." Do not be afraid"

For this proclamation "Do not be afraid", is just what Easter is all about, transformation - the transformation of two terrified women and of us and of this world!

Jesus was killed because of his passion for a different kind of world, what he called the kingdom, something which, he said, is waiting among us for us to discover. As theologian Marcus Borg has written "Easter is about God's "Yes" to what we see in Jesus. Easter is not (necessarily) about believing in a spectacular long ago event, but about participating in what we see in Jesus (as we encounter and experience his risen presence), even if we sometimes are afraid. Crucifixion and the tomb didn't stop him. Easter is about saying "Yes" to the passion of Jesus. He's still here, still recruiting."

The two women, encountering first the empty tomb and then the risen Lord himself, find themselves transformed by their experience. They are enabled to keep faith, even amid their fears, and they go, the first apostles of the Gospel, they go and share their good news even though they were still fearful. They discovered real courage - in spite of their anxieties, their fears, they headed off to do the work they had been given to do. To bear witness in word and deed to the Resurrection.

In the experience which these women and disciples had of the risen Lord Jesus, on that first Easter Day, and, in the experience of the risen Lord which is available to each and every one of us, at all times and in all places, we have God's promise that "life is stronger than death, that love is greater than hate, that mercy overcomes judgment, and that all the sufferings and difficulties of this life are transient - real and palpable, yes, and sometimes deeply painful, most certainly, but they do not have the last word and do not represent the final reality".* For, Christ is Risen - Do not be afraid - Alleluia!! Amen.

(*Words taken from a sermon preparation website - I no longer recall which one. JEA)

