

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 4:35-41

Why are you so fearful?, our Lord Jesus said to His disciples. *How is it that you have no faith?* Surprisingly enough, that did not make them any less fearful, though, did it? Well, it did not; rather, after our Lord Jesus had chastised them for their fear and lack of faith, *they feared exceedingly,* Holy Scripture says, as we heard it.

Well, perhaps it is not all that surprising that being chastised for their fear and lack of faith did not immediately enable them to overcome their fear and lack of faith. Faith does not come from being admonished to have faith; nor will preaching that shames you or even ridicules you for being fearful make you any less fearful. For the inference that inevitably follows from such preaching, namely that if you still know fears and doubts, then you are not a *real* Christian and will not be saved, but rather condemned to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, well, that is not likely to make you any less fearful, either, is it? Anybody who lives under such preaching will know, or rather, anyone who does, who is honest enough to admit his or her fearfulness to himself or herself, as well as his or her other sins and shortcomings.

Such preaching might be enjoyable to those who do not take the Word of God too seriously, those in whose minds *sin* is only *other people's problem*, not my own; they might enjoy the thrill of the fright, of being emotionally aroused. This, however, is not to take the Word of God seriously, or worship, but rather to reduce both to mere entertainment, which is a mockery of the faith.

Sincere Christians who live under such preaching and have been made to think that that is what Christian preaching is, are not set free, but rather made to live fearful for their salvation in a prison of pretence, fearful to acknowledge their fearfulness to themselves, or to God, for to face your fearfulness, they have been made to think, would be to face your eternal death and damnation.

Holy Scripture answers the questions our Lord Jesus asked: *Why are you so fearful?,* and: *How is it that you have no faith?* As we hear it, they said to one another: *Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?* So they did not yet know who our Lord Jesus is. Well, they knew, and yet they did not know; as we who do know also know, and yet do not know; as we who believe believe, and yet do not believe!

The disciples knew very well whom it is that the winds and sea obey; they knew what was written: *God is our refuge and strength, says the Psalm, a very present help in trouble; therefore we will not fear though the earth give way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.* They had made this confession often, as they had sung or spoken the Psalm in their synagogues. And yet, when things became real, really real, they forgot; when they saw the waters roar and foam, they forgot not to be fearful. And even after they had seen our Lord Jesus stilling the storm, they failed to put two and two together; they still did not know who He is; as if they had forgot whom it is that winds and sea obey.

So often, when things become real, even Christians forget that to really believe is to believe that what you believe is real; that God Himself is real, and that *His Word and will, who is real, it actually applies in the real world!*

Most of the time we gladly confess it, that God is real; we gladly confess that we should and must honour and obey Him in all things. We gladly confess that we know His will from His Word. We say that we trust in Him, that when His love is upon us, then all is well, and we have nothing to fear.

But when things become *real*, we forget; when it seems that it might have unpleasant consequences to honour and obey His Word and will. Suddenly we cannot be sure that we *really* know His will from His Word, that is: from Holy Scripture; suddenly we are no longer certain that the right thing to do is to abide by what Holy Scripture teaches; suddenly we wonder if it would not be better to do something else, better for us, better for the congregation, and a better testimony to the world, that we *not* honour and uphold the Word of God.

We have seen it this past year, have we not? Well, we have. As His Church we have been made to ask ourselves whether it is really right to obey God rather than men, when civil authorities command that we *not* do that of which our Lord Jesus has said: *Do this, in my remembrance!* And we have each been made to ask questions of ourselves: whether or not it is more important to honour and obey the Word and will of God than to protect ourselves against the risk of disease and death; whether or not we really trust in God to do right in all things and make all things well for those who believe in Him; whether or not we actually trust in God to allow me to become sick and die *only* if He knows that that is what would serve my good and be good and right for me.

And we have each been made to ask ourselves whether a longer life in this world is better and more important than the eternal life our Lord Jesus promises to those who believe in Him.

Well, for some, it seems, there was never a question; for some, it seems, it was a given that when things become *real*, God and the faith must be set aside. Many churches made this their testimony to the world when asked what they *really* believe; when we were all asked whether or not we actually believe what we used to say we believe.

And many of us who did not give in to our cowardice have had to repent of our cowardice, nevertheless, for our fear and lack of faith; others should no doubt repent of their selfish stubbornness, their loveless lack of care and concern for the wellbeing of others, physically and emotionally. Some of us have had to repent of both; and we have been reminded, once again, of the tremendous goodness of God, that before Him we can repent without despair, and even *joyfully*. *God is good!*

But again, why did the Apostles not know who our Lord Jesus is, so that they were fearful and without faith? With all that they had seen and heard, and with all that they knew already, how could they *not* put two and two together and understand? Well, there are two answers to this; at least two.

First of all, they did not yet know all that we know. They had not yet seen all that we know that they would come to see. They did not yet know that our Lord Jesus had to suffer and die in *Jerusalem*, in order that *all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man may be accomplished*, as He said it, and so He could not perish there, on the lake. They had not yet been told. And even after they had been told, still they would not see it. In fact, not until it had all come to pass would they see it, that our Lord Jesus is the Son of God, who had come into the world to suffer for the salvation of sinners. And so they did not yet know the fullness of the goodness of God. Therefore is it that they cried out to Him as they did: *Master, do You not care that we are perishing?*; because they did not yet know just *how much* He cared, how severely He would suffer, so that sinners may not perish, sinners such as themselves.

Secondly, there is *sin*. There is that in us sinners which cannot and will not believe that which is too good to be true, and too great to be real, that He who is God Himself from eternity would come into the world to suffer for our salvation. There is that in us which cannot and will not embrace the Truth of God, that He really is as good as He claims and has proven Himself to be!

There is that in us which cannot and will not believe it, even though we now know, because now we have been told.

Faith does not come from being admonished to have faith; just as being chastised for our fear and lack of faith will not enable us to overcome our fear and lack of faith.

When and where God will, though, and when and where His Word confronts us with our fear and lack of faith, He Himself will make us to see our ungodliness and unbelief, as will being confronted with our other sins and shortcomings, and make us to see our need for His mercy. When and where He will, His Word of judgement will make us to see that what we need the most is His forgiveness for our sins and shortcomings, for evil and ungodliness and unbelief and impurity in our lives, and in our hearts and minds. In this way, when and where He will, His Word of judgement will prepare us to joyfully embrace His Word of salvation, that He who shall come in glory to judge the living and the dead, He has taken it upon Himself to bear all judgement for us sinners, in our stead and on our behalf, the judgement of His own goodness against all evil, His righteous wrath against all wrong and wrongdoing, and that by doing so, He has won for us all full forgiveness for all our sins and shortcomings, and for *me*, that is: *you*.

And only by His Word of His love and what His love has done for us will fearfulness and lack of faith be overcome in us; only when He has His love shine upon us, in His Word of His love and what His love has done for us, and has it shine into us, only then will His love do what only His love can do, drive away the darkness in us, of death and disobedience and defiance, so that we begin to see His love, and begin to believe in His love, and to love His love, so that we seek and find His love in the Word and worship of His love and what His love has done for us.

And yes, His love binds us to the Word and worship of His love, in which His love comes to us and is given to us, for real, in all its fullness. For His salvation is His, and His alone. It is not for us to take, rather, it must come to us, constantly, from Him, and be *given* to us; it is *His* goodness alone, His glory, not our own, His unfathomable and unbelievable love for sinners, which sin in us cannot and will not believe, but which He nevertheless, out of His goodness and mercy, *makes* us to believe, so that we do belong to Him, and, as His own, have nothing to fear.

Now, to Him, whose power works in us and can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, be glory, in the Church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, for ever and ever. *Amen*.