

Matthew 14:22-36 “Have courage - it’s me. Don’t be afraid.”

I have Merinda’s permission to share this:

Some of you may have received a prayer chain request this week about Merinda & Bob’s newborn grandchild, Lachlan. Everything about the birth was going fine, until Lachlan made his entrance into the world and they realised he wasn’t breathing. There was a great flurry of medical intervention, and Lachlan was whisked off to intensive care. There were grave fears that there were serious heart issues, and worse, that there could be brain damage or another serious disability. Both parents and grandparents were fraught & anxious. Merinda immediately asked the troops to pray - which we have been doing. The good news from the specialist was that it was not as serious as initially thought. As the week has progressed Lachlan has improved. He’s gone from critical to serious, to high care and today Mum was able to hold and feed him for the first time. Merinda & Bob also had a cuddle. Praise God.

I’ve shared this story for two reasons - one is of course that we all love Merinda & Bob and care deeply for them and their family. We rejoice with them that God has answered our prayers.

The other reason is as a reminder that life can turn from calm to frantic in the blink of an eye. There is so little we really have control over. If life for us is pleasant and predictable right now that’s great, but we need to be aware that anything can happen, at any time, and it can all change.

The capacity for fear is written into the human DNA. We will all at some time or other, experience fear - and as Christians we are not immune from this. In fact, there are times when fear is actually healthy. When life is threatened, fear causes an adrenaline rush that galvanizes us into action and helps us protect ourselves and those we love.

But fear is not always helpful. It also has the capacity to diminish, demean and paralyse us. Our Gospel reading this morning addresses this type of fear. The disciples were afraid of the storm, then they were afraid of Jesus who they thought was a malevolent spirit, and then Peter was afraid of being overwhelmed by the waves.

What did Jesus say to them? “Have courage - it’s me. Don’t be afraid.”

Over and over again the message of the Bible is “don’t be afraid!” When Abram was facing the journey to the Promised Land; when the Jews were standing before the Red Sea with Pharaoh’s chariots coming over the horizon; when the angel of the Lord appeared to Mary to tell her that she would bear a child; “Fear not!” said the Lord.

But we all have fears – so how do we ‘fear not’?

First, it helps to acknowledge our fears. We pay a price when we don’t. Looking around this morning, I’d say we all lived through the 60’s, when the ultimate fear was of nuclear war; that one day, some idiot would push the button. Actually, I’ve heard that same fear expressed more than once recently, although the players are different.

This fear of nuclear war was part of the reason that we experienced the “swinging 60’s”. The cry from so many back then was, “What difference does anything make if we are all going to die anyway? We might as well have some fun before we go.” I suspect that we paid a terrible social price back then because we didn’t adequately deal with the fear of nuclear war.

Fear is mentioned more in the Bible than any other human emotion. So if we are carrying any fear right now, we’re definitely not alone. But we do make a mistake when we accept our fears as an inevitable part of life, and choose to just live with them. They can cripple us and rob us of joyful and fruitful lives. So we need to overcome them.

The first step in overcoming the fears in our lives is to **acknowledge them**; to identify their presence in our lives; to actually **name** them, and then take them to God in prayer.

2. Secondly, it helps us overcome our fears when we take action against them.

So many of us just live with our fears.

One way we live with them is to avoid them. If we’re afraid of dogs - we stay away from them; if we’re afraid of spiders, we get someone else to despatch them - or we get one of these.....(spider grabber) If we don’t like public speaking - we just don’t do it.

Or another way we live with our fears is to put up with them. We may live each day with anxieties and worries, that we just get used to. Perhaps we’re concerned about our health; or we’re worried we might fall, or perhaps our families cause us concern. We go to bed thinking about them, and we wake up thinking about them. Our fears can feel like they’ve always been there.

Think about our Gospel reading this morning. When Peter took his eyes off Jesus and started to sink, he didn't just accept the panic in his heart and tell himself to keep swimming. He was afraid, but he also knew Jesus was more powerful than the storm, so he called out to Jesus for help, and put his trust in him. When Jesus held out his hand, Peter took it in faith. Jesus delivered him not only from his fear, but also from the storm.

That's the action we too can take. We need to recognise that Jesus is more powerful than any storm that can shake us. We take the fear we have named to Jesus, we ask him to help us and we put our trust in him. Jesus will deliver us. He may not always deliver us physically from a situation, but he will certainly deliver us from our fear.

Paul, writing to the young disciple Timothy said, "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of love, power and a sound mind."

Once we have recognised our fear, and turned it over to Jesus, we find we can then sense another power at work within us – the power of the Spirit of God who lives in us. Once we focus on God and not our fear, his power is able to break through, bringing serenity and peace – at times in the very midst of the storms in our life.

Having said that - I don't want to oversimplify things here. There are times when fears can become oppressive in a person's life and can become entwined with mental health. If that happens, medical intervention and or/counselling may be called for.

Paul reminds us in Philippians, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

This verse reminds us to actively place our worries in God's hands. Note that Paul tells us to do this through prayer and petition – which means it's okay to unload on God. But then he also says to do it "with thanksgiving" which indicates that once we have unloaded, we should leave our fears with him, say 'thank you' and embrace his peace.

3. Thirdly it helps us deal with our fears by holding on to the knowledge that regardless of what happens, God will be with us.

I remember a childhood incident when our family drove from Kiama to Sydney on a day trip. It was in the 60's, and back then, that was quite an excursion!

My gran was visiting from South Africa. While we were in Sydney, my parents left us children with Gran to poke around in the shops while they attended to some business. When it came time to meet my parents and go home there were some crossed wires. We waited and waited in front of David Jones, but they didn't show up. Gran was in a foreign country, and a strange city, and had no way of contacting my parents. No mobile phones back then. The city was big and busy and scary, and Gran was obviously anxious. But we kids weren't at all worried. Gran had us by the hand and we trusted her. She was a grown up. I thought all grown ups were invincible – so I felt completely safe. Gran eventually decided that the best thing would be to catch a train back, and my parents finally found us all at Central Station.

God loves us more than we can possibly imagine. He invites us to place our hand in his when we are afraid, and to lean back and trust him. He is bigger than any storm that might come our way.

Though God will not necessarily calm the storms in our lives, he will be with us through them. And we will be safe. The Psalmist wrote: **“When I am afraid I put my trust in you.”**

There's a story about an old Bishop called Warren Chandler. As he lay on his deathbed, a friend asked him if he was afraid. “Please tell me frankly”, he said, “do you fear crossing the river of death?”

“Why would I be afraid to cross?” replied Chandler, “I belong to a father who owns the land on both sides of the river.”

Let us not simply live with our fears, rather let us choose to deal with them and be free of their crippling influence in our lives and our spirits. Let's embrace the 'peace which passes all understanding' which God offers those who bring their fears to him in trust and thanksgiving.

Like Sarah & Chris, with baby Lachlan, we've no idea what storm may blow into our lives this week; and of course it may be that some of us are enduring a storm at this very moment. There is something we can all hold on to in this: even as the storm rages around us, if we listen carefully with our heart, we will hear the same assurance Jesus gave his disciples, “Have courage - it's me. Don't be afraid.”

Let us pray.