

DO NOT FEAR AS THEY FEAR

Adrenalin is known as the 'fight or flight' hormone, produced by our bodies at times of stress. Used for the best it can make you perform better or run faster! It can help you stand up to situations -'fight' or it can help you get away- 'flight'. It can make us more powerful, aggressive, strong. At its worst, of course, it can make us crumple and feel drained.

But what makes us afraid? What do we fear?

'I sat by her bedside begging her not to go, not to leave me. I was angry with her for being ill and not even replying. I had lost so much already and my life was invested in her. I needed her to make me happy, to make me function. It was completely ridiculous to say any of it but I was terrified. How on earth could she dare to die?'

Perhaps it's the death of someone we love that we fear the most; perhaps it's being on our own; perhaps it's the fear of a new situation where we feel out of our depth, or the fear of loss of income or home or health; perhaps someone is speaking rumours that threaten to destroy our good name. Perhaps it's something completely irrational that no one else would understand.

We often become afraid. Despite our Christian faith and all the times that the Bible says 'Do not be afraid' we still fear. And it can do dreadful things to us. And adrenalin kicks in and we can find ourselves, as it were, running for our lives, or unexpectedly fighting our corner and becoming aggressive in the way we speak or act, or else just crumpling into a heap.

Fear can possess and dominate hearts and minds with disastrous effects.

Peter spends a lot of his first letter urging people not to be afraid of other people or of their circumstances, but to be strong by having a proper fear of God.

'Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened' (v.14) he says. 'But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord' (v.15)

Don't fear what other people fear. Don't let fear be in charge. Have Christ as Lord, have Christ in charge in your hearts instead.

The things that people feared in Peter's day were different in many ways from

what our 21st century UK culture teaches us to fear. They had set their lives on Jesus Christ. It's easy to forget that Jesus wasn't just a loving and kind man. He was someone who caused a massive upheaval in political terms and religious terms. So anyone who sides with him is seen as a troublemaker. It had already led to them having to flee, being scattered in groups all over the place. It was probably hard to keep going in faith. Before long there would be real, active attempts to imprison or kill them. They had every reason to fear: imprisonment, loss of family, possessions, any kind of security, life itself.

If you're eager to do good, who will harm you? He asks (v.13) Sounds good in theory, but some will just dislike what they stand for- it has always been like that for Christians. But even if you should suffer for what is right, you will be blessed. Do not fear what they fear....

That is a quote from Isaiah 8:12-13. There was an army coming. Every little whisper was seen as conspiracy, there was terror, so people were giving up on their trust in God to see them through. So God says *'do not fear what they fear and do not dread it. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to read and he will be a sanctuary.....*

But to the people who don't listen, who don't trust, who don't follow he will be a rock causing people to stumble.... The apostles knew that was true as well. People who followed Jesus, who feared him, would stay safe; people who didn't would find themselves stumbling. A solid rock to stand on or an obstacle to fall over.

So now Peter says: there may well be armies or possible dangers, you may be anxious about loss and all that's uncertain or unknown; there may well be a loss of name or family or possessions or physical life; but don't be afraid in the same way they are. Fear, respect, trust God. Set him apart in your hearts. Fear of danger sets the adrenalin flowing and causes you to fight, to be aggressive or violent in return, or else to run away in terror. Fear of God causes you to draw towards him and see his goodness, his protection, his love, his power to save you. And then, when people question you and ridicule you or threaten you the result will be that you can *'be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have...'* (v.15) The answer will have something to do with a trust in the God you properly reverence and respect and believe is really in charge and has more power than any human or natural power.

Don't fear what they fear....do not be frightened but in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord

OK but what gives Peter the right to say those things? Maybe the very fact that he *did* get frightened, so frightened that the adrenalin started him shouting out that he didn't have anything to do with Jesus when he was questioned, and led to him running away just like Jesus said he would.

Peter knew fear- he wasn't in control, he couldn't change things, he might be arrested himself. After the resurrection he also knew the power of God, the forgiveness of God, the chance of a new future. So now he's not going to waste that chance and he's doing all he can to urge people to keep going and keep believing God is stronger.

Look, he says, at what Jesus has done to save you.

A couple of weeks ago a museum was opened in the U.S. To commemorate the 9/11 disaster when the twin towers of the World Trade Centre were hit by terrorists and 3000 people died.

Amongst the exhibits there is a pair of high heeled black shoes worn by a woman who said 'I did not plan on walking down 77 flights of stairs' She had to take them off to escape.

The stone steps that led from the plaza of an adjoining building to the street outside have been saved- one of the only pieces of the whole structure that survived the wreckage- as a sign of the route to freedom. Ordinary steps that most people didn't think twice about in their everyday lives as they went home to the train or out to get a sandwich or have a cigarette.

Other people spoke about a man wearing a red bandana who went up and down the stairs in the buildings countless times guiding people to safety through the smoke, most people not knowing his name, before he was buried in rubble himself as the Towers collapsed.

To many people he was a saviour. Jesus Christ comes again and again to guide frightened people to safety. Many don't even know his name. Then it seemed as if he had been buried himself, after helping so many down the stairway to safety.

He died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. (v. 18)

But whereas that man in the red bandana really did die, Jesus *was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit (v.18)*

If he lives, he really is more powerful than anything the world can throw at us or anyone who threatens: *do not fear those who can hurt the body but cannot hurt the soul, but rather fear the one who has power to put soul and body into hell....not one sparrow falls to the ground without your father knowing...every hair on your head is numbered*

Those were Jesus' words. God does know what you face but he's in charge. *'You will have trouble in the world, but I have overcome the world' (John 16:33)*- some of his parting words to his friends before his death.

So don't be afraid like other people. Have that place in your hearts that thinks on who Jesus is and what he's done and about the powers who are in submission (v.23) and let that affect your behaviour. Don't let the adrenalin 'fight or flight' reactions overpower you. Instead, Peter's advice is to keep on speaking about your faith, having gentleness and respect (v.16a), keeping a good conscience so you know you've done the right thing whatever others might want to say (v.16b) and to hold onto your baptism as a sign of cleansing (v.21) . That's not the fear that lashes out with tongues or fists or wants to get its own back; it's not the fear that wants to hide or get away. It's the reverence and trust of God who is bigger than the rest.

The saviour in the red bandana guided those who never expected to be in danger of losing their lives, who never expected to be walking down 77 floors, but who will be forever grateful. We have much more to be grateful for. *Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened. But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord....your baptism saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand, with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him'.*

Hilary Edgerton - Vicar