

Watchnight: Filled with fear*Luke 2:1-14*

For a story that in the contemporary mind is associated with light and gentleness and kindness and softness, it is unsettling to read that one of the more common feelings associated with the Christmas story as the Bible tells it is the feeling of fear.

Mary, at the time she was told by the angel Gabriel that she would be the mother of Jesus - as told not to be afraid.

Joseph, with the uncertain shame of being engaged to a pregnant teenager carrying a child he knew wasn't his, is told in a dream by an angel not to be afraid.

King Herod and all Jerusalem, at the arrival of the wise men from the East who came seeking the King of the Jews, whose star they had been following, was troubled and fearful.

The shepherds in the cold, dark fields outside Bethlehem, were filled with fear when they were surrounded by the glory of God's messengers, the angels, and were also told, *"Be not afraid..."*

Fear in so many places of the nativity story. Fear for the individuals, fear for groups of people.

Christmas carols have their fearful edge too:

"Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight."

"'Fear not' he said, for sudden dread had seized their troubled mind"

"But with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long..."

"Herod then with fear was filled...all the little boys he killed..."

Fear. For too long it was the Church's shame, the operative word that spoke of the Last Judgment, and anguish and damnation. We shouldn't lose the idea of judgement: our actions, good and bad, have consequences and we fool ourselves if we think otherwise. But remember Who it is that will

judge. The baby of Bethlehem, the Man Who walked the roads of Galilee, and the streets of Jerusalem. Robed in the dreadful majesty of love, Jesus comes to sift through all lives. God's persistent demand is that we should not be fearful, but loving. Of each other, of community, of country, and of God.

Fear, the operative word in too much of what passes for politics across our world and in our own country. In Russia and Ukraine; in Israel and Palestine; in the United States and Venezuela, and Greenland; in Britain. You don't have to go far into print journalism to read headlines of fear. Fear of refugees; fear of change; fear of people on social benefits; fear of the younger generation; fear of the older generation; fear of difference; fear of the other. A fear that makes us think things, say things, do things that corrodes heart and mind and soul and community. Fear is at what lies at the heart of MAGA; and the Reform Party; and Putin's Russia; and Netanyahu's Israel. Someone once wrote, *"If you want to control someone, all you have to do is to make them feel afraid."*^{vi} Trump. Farage. Putin. Netanyahu. And others. Shameless pedlars of paranoia and fear. *"Fear is no policy; it represents the absence of courage and a poverty of imagination. To be defined by our fears is to accept as normal the lowest possible level of emotional intelligence."*^{vi} *"Living in fear is no way for a mature society to flourish. The proponents of National Socialism in 1930s Germany lived in fear...it was paranoia and a lust for power that (it) to persecute anyone...We all know what price the world paid...for prosecuting the politics of fear."*^{viii}

We live in a time when fear is real for many people. The economic squeeze on many households. The threat of war, and the reality of war in many countries. The stretching of resources to meet health and social care. The overburdening of the justice system. The epidemic of loneliness that affects people in every generation, young and old. Unemployment. Homelessness.

In the faith communities, in our church in Morningside, with an active but aging congregation, and in churches across the country, the squeeze on finances, which are largely donations, is existential. Will we be here in 5 years' time if our community does not respond to the invitation to look at principles and priorities and what you want for our community. What you believe in and what you are prepared to commit of your time and talents and money to keep the hope going, and the light going, and the inclusion going, and the compassion going. People come to this Church daily to events and programmes, for coffee and welcome and chat, without which they would go from Sunday to Sunday without speaking to another living soul. In this Church we aspire to be a place of welcome and inclusion for Morningside. Our fear for our future is real, and it is felt not only by faith communities but by charities and voluntary organisations across our city and up and down our land. How will we go on if fear is not challenged and sustained support not given? Is this what you want? As a community? As a city? As a country? As a world?

The shepherds were filled with fear. It has echoes tonight.

The opposite of fear is not courage but compassion. We fear what we do not know; the parents of fear are ignorance and indifference. We need not fear what we believe in. We need not fear what we are committed to, and what we love. Jesus tells us that perfect fear casts out love. Do you choose to stay with fear? Or do you journey toward love, and the demands and responsibilities and privileges of love?

The shepherds in their cold field, in the dark, hilly countryside around Bethlehem, socially marginal, unimportant, nameless. The wrong kind of people in their community. No wonder they were afraid when an unexpected light shone and something, someone, spoke to them. But when the angels spoke it was not of judgement, or condemnation; it was of compassion, and love, and

good news. *"Be not afraid, **fear not**...for I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all people; for to you is born this day...a Saviour, Who is Christ the Lord."*

Fear is a terrible motivator, but fear is not what the angels came to tell the shepherds. They came with good news. In light, with hope, and encouragement, and invitation, and evidence. *"Be not afraid...good news...great joy...a Saviour...a babe...in a manger..."* Go and look for yourselves, if you want. Go and find Him.

We need to understand fear and why it is real. We need to know that fear is contrary to the heart of Christmas. God's love, in Jesus, comes down at Christmas, to work with us to confront fear, and to bring in our belief in and work for a community based on love. To change the present and shape the future.

Will your commitment to love, not fear, inform your voting at next year's Scottish Parliamentary elections? Will your commitment to love, not fear, inspire you not simply to give money to charity if you can, but to get involved and share something of yourself with us and with so many other good causes? Your time, your talents. Will your commitment to love, not fear, encourage you to speak out and act up when what you see as wrong or hateful or harmful in our world needs to be met head on with compassionate resistance?

Will you say, 'This is not the way we want to be. This is not the community and country we want to be.'

Shepherds in their fields were filled with fear. Then angels spoke, and light shone, and wonder came, and hope raised its head, and the shepherds ran, and discovered, and wondered, and maybe believed, their lives, their world, changed.

May it be the same for you this Christmas. May it be the same for you. Not fear, but compassion. Not despair, but hope. Not darkness, but light. Not judgement, but love. *"Be not afraid..."* Jesus is here!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Paulo Coelho

ⁱⁱ Peter Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, p106

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p105