

Do not be afraid ...

... I Save You!

A sermon given on the Second Sunday of Christmas, 1st January 2023 – by Rt Revd Bishop David James, in Beverley Minster

Luke 2:8-21

Back in November, Gill and I went away for a few days to Suffolk. And while we were there and we popped into Blythburgh Church - the experience blew my mind. I'd been before, but had forgotten just what an amazing place it is. To enter the church. You enter the lights: yes, the walls are painted white, but they merely reflect the light that comes through the large mediaeval windows from the open East Anglian skies and bounces off the surrounding marshes. Blythburgh Church is famous for its angels. As you stand there enveloped by the transcendence, you look up to the heavens, or rather to the rafters. And there in the rafters are the angels of Blythburgh with their unfurled wings. When heaven and earth come close, angels appear and like as not, their message is, "*Do not be afraid.*" - Are they here for us this morning, as we journey into 2023?

In John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, there are two characters, father and daughter, called 'Despondency' and 'Much Afraid'. Despondency explains to Christian that it is slavish fears that have kept them from their journey, "For to be plain with you," he says, "they are ghosts which we entertained when we first began as pilgrims, and we could never shake them off." We no longer fear the goblins and foul things that our ancestors feared, but we do have our own fears nevertheless: fears generated by what is happening out there; fears of an uncertain and to us, unknown future - and 2023 looks very uncertain in all sorts of ways; and also fears that we have generated within ourselves.

An element of fear is essential for our survival - we need to heed the flashing red lights. But fear can paralyse us, strangle us. When we're afraid, we build a fortress to protect ourselves, but that fortress becomes our prison. Timothy Radcliffe in his book, *What's the Point of Being a Christian?* says that fear dissolves society and undermines citizenship. Most people would say that it is courage that overcomes fear - courage, from the French word for heart - remember Richard Coeur de Lion - Lion Heart.

But the apostle John says that it is love that casts out fear, "*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*" He's speaking primarily about our relationship with God, but it's not clear when he writes whether it's our love for God that casts out fear or God's love for us. That love begets love, "*We love because God first loved us.*"

Yesterday, Gill and I received an email from some good friends from Southampton. And in this email, Tim said that the most looked up verse in the Bible in 2022 was this from Isaiah: *"So do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."*

"Do not be afraid," said the angel to Mary, *"for you have found favour with God. You will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus."*

"Do not be afraid," says the angel to Joseph when he discovered his fiancée was pregnant - *"Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."* Do not be afraid - God is with you - God loves you.

The birth of any first baby is quite scary. There is the experience for the mother of actually giving birth. No amount of NCT classes or breathing exercises or watching 'Call the Midwife' can quite prepare them for what is to come. Then there's the experience of being a parent and the way a little helpless scrap of life dominates your whole existence, night as well as day? But they soon get easier, don't they? No. And what of the process of actually coming into the world? How scary is that? It's perhaps as well we don't remember.

Among the metaphors we use to express what we believe, how we come into the life of being a Christian, is the idea of regeneration, of being born again. *"You must be born again"*, said Jesus to Nicodemus. Not merely making a new start, but entering a whole new world, a whole new order of existence. And whether we are thinking of embarking on a new faith journey with Christ, or moving out of the security of our current home or current job into the unknown, or we're about to act as parent or midwife in another person's life or in another communities, regeneration and the message of the angel is for us and for them, 'Fear not; God loves us; God goes before us; God upholds us.'

"Do not be afraid," said the angel to the shepherds, *"for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. To you is born in the city of David, a Saviour who is the Messiah, the Lord"*. In Jewish society at the time of Jesus, there was a class of people lumped together as sinners: it included prostitutes; tax collectors, working for the occupying forces; people society would not accept; as well as sinners as we might think of them. It included anybody on the margins of society, such as lepers. And it included a particularly smelly bunch of people who slept among their animals and smelt like them and talked to them more than they talked to people. Shepherds were not Bo Peeps in pretty dresses. They were sinners on the edge of society. And the Messiah came as their friend, as their Saviour, to save them from their sins.

Bishops often go to prison on Christmas Day. When I worked in Wakefield diocese, the Bishop of Wakefield went to Wakefield jail on Christmas Day and I went to New Hall women's Prison between Wakefield and Huddersfield. I would stand outside the prison gates at 7:30 on Christmas morning in the cold and the dark and the wet, waiting to be let in, having gone to bed late after midnight communion, thinking, if there's one place I don't want to be on Christmas morning, this is it. I remember one particular occasion, the chaplain, Jane had seven short carol services around the wings and in the mother and baby unit because there weren't enough warders to bring the ladies over to chapel. On this particular morning, as we stood outside one of the wings, Jane said, "We'll get in and out of here as quickly as possible. We nearly had a riot the other day". And what followed was the shortest carol service ever. We began as we began this morning with Hark the Herald Angels Sing. I think we sang just one verse and the ladies acted as if they were at a football match. [They raised their arms like this - 'Hark the Herald' - this is going to be good.] We had a very short reading, a 60 second sermon, a prayer, another abbreviated carol and we were off except two of the ladies asked me if I would pray for them, and soon there was a queue of 20 or so lined up behind them, and the rest of our beautiful service had all but disappeared. I made the mistake of asking, "What would you like me to pray for?" "Will you pray for my brother?" said one, "He was murdered last week." Another said, "I'm a heroin addict and I go out in six weeks. Will you pray for my parents to forgive me?" Another, "Will you pray for my children? I miss them so much."

"Do not be afraid," said the angel to those ladies in New Hall prison, "God loves us, god is with us. God forgives us, God upholds us."

"Do not be afraid" said the angel to the women at the empty tomb on that first Easter day. *"I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified, for he has been raised as he said."* Matthew tells us that the women ran from the tomb with fear and great joy. What a mixture of emotions. The person who had made them feel that God was with them, that God was for them, that God forgave them, the person who'd opened the door to life, had given them meaning and purpose and a reason to get up in the morning - had been cruelly executed.

"Do not be afraid." God had not allowed death [to have] the last word. Jesus, the life-giver, the hope-giver, the love-giver was and is and is to come.

Over recent weeks, we've had a number of deaths among the Minster congregations, including our oldest member, Gertie Rispin. We go to their funerals or their memorial services to express our loss, to be joined in our sorrow with family and friends, to be

reminded of our own mortality - *'all flesh is grass'* - and to be renewed in our faith in a God who is with us in life and in and through death.

"Do not be afraid."

I don't look up the angels in Blythburgh church for reassurance. Rather, I look down at a baby in all its helpless vulnerability, surrounded by love; a baby given the name 'God Saves.' I put my finger into his tiny hands and I put my life into his outstretched arms. In Jesus, the Messiah, God says to us at the beginning of this new year, "Do not be afraid. I save you."

Reading Texts

Luke 2:8-21

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." ¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. ²¹ On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.