**“Draw near to my soul and redeem me…”**

**Psalm 69:18**

Draw near to my soul, *and* redeem it;
Deliver me because of my enemies.

19You know my reproach, my shame, and my dishonour;
My adversaries *are* all before You.
20Reproach has broken my heart,
And I am full of [[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2069%3A18-36&version=NKJV#fen-NKJV-14956a)]heaviness;
I looked *for someone* to take pity, but *there was* none;
And for comforters, but I found none.

Trying to make sense of our readings and providing an appropriate reflection on them is always an interesting challenge and when Revd Samuel set our strapline for this week’s pew sheet it gave me yet further reason to ponder on how to interpret the various readings and as ever with one eye on the week’s events. The verses I have just read are the whole of the Psalm 69.18-20 which is the Psalm for this service from our Lectionary.

As I was writing this, news was coming through of the uprising or mutiny in Russia as the mercenary force Wagner turned against the Russian army or is it Putin. [Putin could well call upon this Psalm for deliverance – “draw near to my soul and redeem it; Deliver me because of my enemies”.

Then of course earlier in the week we were rooting for a successful rescue of the Titan sub, hoping against hope the occupants would be found before their oxygen supply ran out, our hopes only to be crushed by the very weight of realisation that a mass equivalent to the Eiffel Tower landing on it had destroyed the vessel in milliseconds along with its five members. One asks - was there time for any of them to utter “draw near to my soul, *and* redeem it”. I think we must conclude there was not.

The words from Matthew 28: “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” should give us cause for comfort.

It is easy to assume that what happens to others cannot happen to us and there is indeed a certain fascination in watching media reporting as disasters unfold and, in the days, following tragedies, searching frantically for explanations of why something has happened and if one is found breathing a collective sigh of relief. If we can point to an explanation of why something happened, it becomes easier to believe it won’t happen to us. Not that any of us here has probably contemplated taking to a submersible to view the gravesite of 1200 people who perished over a century ago, something which strikes me as somewhat ghoulish; nor am I having to consider the issues Putin is having to consider. But another disaster that occurred to another vessel, this time overloaded with migrants seeking an escape from their miserable lives has been quietly swept off the media front pages without a lot of airtime. Most of those who died on the Titanic were in steerage, migrants seeking a better life in the US, in the same way as the migrants on the overloaded ferry were seeking a better life in Europe. They probably had more time than the Titan crew to ask “draw near to my soul and redeem it; Deliver me because of my enemies”.

Looking more closely at our Matthew reading, Jesus makes it very clear to his disciples that they should not for a moment imagine that they will escape the abuse that he has received. He came full of compassion for those around him; he healed them; listened to them; proclaimed the good news of the kingdom and ultimately died for them – and they called him the devil (‘Beelzebul’ in verse 25 was a name used for the devil).

The disciples, Jesus declares, when faced with the same challenges will fare nt better. If this is what happened to Jesus, the disciples can expect it to happen to them too and by extension, we too can expect to be treated in the same way.

However, as we often are told, we should not be afraid, that oft repeated command we find woven through the pages of the Bible.

You can easily see why Jesus needed to tell his disciples not to be afraid, at this point in his instructions to them. After all he has warned them that the authorities will be after them; that they too will suffer physical and emotional violence; and now, that people will start calling them the sort of names they have already begun to call him. Plenty of reasons to be afraid and yet Jesus tells them “Don’t be afraid”. The question has to be though, why not? Its not simply that God will look after them, a sort of given, but that a time will come when everything will be uncovered. Everything presently secret will be disclosed, made known.

Now you might think that if you knew your most private thoughts and words were to be made open, disclosed, you would be pretty justified in being afraid. We had a bit of that when the Govn’t ministers WhatsApp messages had to be disclosed to the Covid Enquiry, a sense of horror that comments thought strictly between the group were now going to be aired fully in public!

But instead, Jesus seems to be assuming that what will come to light on that day is the disciples’ loyalty and faith; they will be seen to have followed Israel’s true Messiah, the world’s true Lord. Their patience and perseverance will emerge into the light. What may have looked like obstinacy or even arrogance will at last be seen as what it is, a resolute determination to follow the Lord of life wherever he leads. I.e., truth will out, justice will prevail and those who have lived with integrity and innocence despite what the world says about them, will be vindicated. That rather than a quick God-will-look-after-you message, is what Jesus is ultimately offering.

But, whilst learning not to be afraid, they must also learn that there is one who does deserve fear, even if that warning (in verse 28) is balanced by a further ‘do not be afraid’ in verse 31. Why?

Jesus believed that the Israel of his day faced enemies at two different levels. Firstly, the obvious one – Rome, Herod and his minions. They were the ones with the power to kill the body. But there were others, darker forces at work, with the power to kill the soul as well; enemies who were battling for that soul even now during Jesus’ ministry and who were using the obvious enemies as cover. But it is in fact even worse than that because the demonic powers that are greedy for the soul of God’s people are using their very desire for justice and vengeance as the bait on the hook. The people of light are never more vulnerable than when they are lured into fighting the darkness with yet more darkness. But to balance that fear and indeed to outweigh it totally, Jesus gives us one of the most striking promises about the detailed love and care of God, not only for every one of his creatures but indeed for every single hair on their heads meaning that just as nothing is too great for him to do, so nothing is too small for him to care about.

It is further knowing that the one we should fear is not God himself, He is the one we do not have to fear, He is very one we can trust with our lives, our souls, our bodies, everything.

“Do not be afraid” is also to be found in our Genesis reading with the angel of the Lord called to Hagar as she sits alone with her child bereft in the wilderness. As with the later account of the trip with his father to the mountain where Abraham was prepared to obey God to the extent of sacrificing his beloved son, here we find his mother forcing his childhood half-brother to be exiled along with his mother, so depriving him of his company. Sarah, even though she now has all she thought she wanted and is assured that her son is upheld by God’s promise, she cannot bear to share anything, not even happiness it would seem, with another. Her actions in forcing out Hagar demonstrate a lack of trust in God and still feels she has to take matters into her own hands. Abraham may be a hero of faith but he along with Sarah do not seem to consider Isaac’s feelings. But perhaps that’s just a 21st century person talking. God does not need perfect people to work with. It is our very imperfections as humans that emphasise the simple truth that we are wholly dependent upon God, justified by God’s faithfulness, rather than by our own actions. Hagar may have been turned out by Abraham and Sarah as they squabble over how to make God keep his promises but she is certainly not deserted by God. Hagar plumbs the depths of God’s faithfulness and God is faithful to Hagar, sheltering her from human cruelty and faithlessness enabling the boy to grow to adulthood in the wilderness, learning the skills necessary to survive in that environment.

God does not need perfect people with whom to work as is very evident with Abraham and Sarah. Our very imperfections emphasise the simple truth that we are totally dependent upon God, justified by God’s faithfulness, not by our actions.

Turning back to our Matthew reading we see that it’s “enough” for the disciple to be like the teacher and that “enough” can and should be heard as a form of reassurance. All that is required of us is to find within ourselves that point of contact, a glimpse of likeness, catching the sound that “gentle voice calling”. Jesus reinforces the word “enough” by telling us to have no fear. We will always have reasonable reasons to be afraid. Serving Jesus will not insulate us from them – not even irrational or obsessive ones. The promise we have is that we cannot be parted from our heavenly Father. What we have and what we do cannot set us apart from God, simply because of who we are, His children.

In Paul’s message to the Romans in this part of his Epistle, the disciple is warming up to the theme of confidence in God which we find further on in chapter 8, making the same point as that in our Matthew passage. Chapter 8 often brings solace and hope to Christians at funeral services. This passage from chapter 6 touches those who have yet to hear the call of Jesus. It can be heard mediated through the words of Dylan Thomas, repeating over and over again the words “and death shall have no more dominion” (from verse 9) in his poem of the same name.

“Have no fear”, “do not fear”, “do not be afraid”, Jesus says. Where else can we find clearer reassurance for the fettering pain of our humanity. It should be a huge relief for us that we have such a teacher as Jesus – leading by example, patience, constancy and correcting with love. But it should also be a huge relief to us that to want to be like him is enough. Perfection is not a requirement, if that was ever possible and what a relief it is to know that. *Reread the Psalm* Amen

**And death shall have no dominion**

And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.
Under the windings of the sea
They lying long shall not die windily;
Twisting on racks when sinews give way,
Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not break;
Faith in their hands shall snap in two,
And the unicorn evils run them through;
Split all ends up they shan't crack;
And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.
No more may gulls cry at their ears
Or waves break loud on the seashores;
Where blew a flower may a flower no more
Lift its head to the blows of the rain;
Though they be mad and dead as nails,
Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;
Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,
And death shall have no dominion.