



part. Northerners were thought to be very much second-class religious. Hence the saying “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*” The Northerners must prove themselves constantly to be true and devout believers.

This community then, was a very frightened one, living in fear for their own survival. Now imagine how those people must have felt when one of their own young men, brought up in their village since childhood, stands up and declares publicly that he is to be the Savior of his people. If the Romans hear him they will see him as a threat to Rome; if the southerners hear him they will accuse him of blasphemy. Either way, it looks as though he will be destroyed and the chances are that he will bring his village down with him. So shut him up, quick!

&&&&&&&&&&

A very frightened community and fear is one of the most destructive of all human emotions. Fear quite literally paralyzes you. Just as a scared rabbit will stand stock still in the middle of the road, gazing in terror at a car’s headlights, rather than use its natural speed to run out of the way, so fear holds us in a deathly trap.

When we are afraid we find it impossible to think rationally, to plan a clear course of action.

When we are afraid it seems totally inevitable that our job will be lost, our loved one will die, our illness will prove serious, our relationship will fall apart. We cannot begin to conceive of a positive outcome.

When we are afraid, we lose confidence in ourselves. The gifts and the strengths we might have had now seem worthless or non-existent.

When we are afraid, we look for a quick bolt hole. We want a place which seems safe to us. We cannot cope with new ideas, new people or new situations.

When we are afraid, it is difficult for God or for anybody else to get through to us. Our fear takes over our every thought and our every emotion. It is impossible for us to be helped or guided because we simply want to curl up, stay where we are and hope that the threat will go away.

The community at Nazareth was paralyzed with fear and this was why they could not hear the promises of Jesus of new life to come; they could not rise to the challenge of supporting him; they could not believe in their own strengths as people of God; they could not receive the living word of God as it came to them in Christ.

As a religious community they were trying to keep themselves safe whereas in fact, like the rabbit in the middle of the road, they were looking straight at destruction. They were not hearing the word of God, they were not fulfilling the work of God, they were stifling rather than encouraging the spiritual growth of their people and, far from proving their credentials as a village of true believers, they would go down in history as the village who got it wrong- badly wrong.

The only way to deal with fear is to grapple with it, go into battle against it, use our strengths, call on our comrades and face up to that which is scaring us.

When something is threatening you, standing still is not an option.

&&&&&&&&&&

“Standing still is not an option.” Where have we heard that before? We have heard it from the leaders of our denomination; from the people who point out that the URC is declining both numerically and financially at an alarming rate. The URC is in a very



priority, not the first. The Christian church began as a missionary group, formed of people who were prepared to gamble their lives for the sake of bringing Christ's Gospel of peace and reconciliation to the world.

How did he do it? Jesus fired his followers with love. He showed them the people who were hungry, poor and oppressed. He showed them the people who were sick in body and mind. He showed them the people who were enslaved to false gods that brought them nothing but disappointment. He showed them the corrupt and selfish leaders who cared nothing for the wellbeing of their people. He showed them the people who had become so traumatized and frightened by life that they could not hear the voice of God or experience his presence.

*Here they are, he said, they are like sheep without a shepherd. Go into all the world in my name.*

It sounded a terrifying prospect but they did it. They did it because they loved Jesus Christ and because they loved the people he had given into their care. Because they loved, they forgot to be afraid. Even when they were flung into prison they sang hymns; even when they were beaten up in the streets they prayed for their attackers; even when they went to their death they kept a smile on their faces and reassured their friends.

And amazingly that community grew. That community flourished. That community overcame all the challenges of a secular and hostile world. That community overcame their fear with love.

If the Christian church is to survive then it must rediscover its original purpose of mission. And if Christians are to be missionaries, ambassadors for Jesus Christ then they must overcome their fears. And the starting point for getting the better of fear is to be fired up with love. No strategies for growth and outreach will come to anything unless they are rooted in love.

I would like to close with the words of an ancient Celtic Prayer:

*O Christ of the poor and the yearning,*

*Kindle in my heart within a flame of love for my neighbour, for my foe, for my friend, for my kindred all. From the humblest thing that lives to the name that is highest of all, kindle in my heart within a flame of love. Amen.*