

The Greek writer, Plutarch, who was born within 15 years of the death of Jesus, claimed that the people of Sparta ---- a renowned race of warriors who trained in endurance --- greatly honoured the God Phobos. Phobos was the twin brother of Deimos --- their respective names meaning fear and terror. Spartan warriors often sported images of Phobos and Deimos on their shields, believing that the gods, in response to this honour, would strike fear and terror into the hearts of their enemies. Plutarch also records that the Spartan people had a great respect for fear as the most effective way of controlling and holding the state together. They were far from unique in that; probably not the first and certainly not the last to hold that view.

Only a few years before Plutarch's birth, Jesus, we are told, was followed into the wilderness by a crowd of some 5000 people, eager to hear him preach and teach. Matthew tells us, in the portion we read today, that as evening came Jesus was approached by his disciples anxious that he should send the people away to buy food for themselves in the nearby villages. The picture painted is one that might easily lead us to suppose that Jesus had his head in the clouds; that he was charismatic but maybe not terribly practical. That, of course, is a tension which exists to this day within the body of the Church between those who want to dream dreams and those whose stock entry phrase is "That's all very well --- but ---!"

In response to this earnest and sincerely practical request from his disciples, Jesus says "***They need not go away; you give them something to eat.***". Incredulous, the disciples point to the meagre rations which they have; Five loaves of bread and two small fish. Inside they must be thinking "***Get a grip man --- surely you have had too much sun!***"

What follows is described in a very orderly and matter of fact way --- but it constituted a miracle of enormous importance and eternal significance. God is blessed; the meal is dedicated to him, and everyone is fed, with baskets leftover. Countless books have been written trying to explain what happened and we are left to take our pick from their ideas. But it's not the "***How did it happen?***" that matters anywhere nearly as much as does the "***Why did it happen?***" What is the point of this miracle --- what is its significance in understanding the Gospel?

Last week Matthew shared with us some of Jesus' parables concerning the Kingdom of God – or the Kingdom of Heaven, as Matthew chooses to call it. We noted then --- not for the first time --- - that this Kingdom of God is not a place but rather a state of being. It speaks of an attitude of

mind and heart and spirit because it speaks of relationship. When we are in the Kingdom of God then our attitude is one of love and reverence to God; reaching out to God in humility and in awe as we respond to God's love for us.

Page | 2

Jesus' parables --- the four we looked at last week --- said that even though this relationship may begin as something tiny – disproportionately small in comparison to the size of the challenge --- yet it carries within it all the potential to succeed greatly. And because that is so --- this Kingdom of God is like a discovered treasure or a precious pearl. It is worth more than anything else you possess. So, the stakes are high according to Jesus --- the Kingdom of God deserves our wholehearted attention.

It is often said and with no small justification --- that it is extremely difficult to build a relationship with a God who is invisible and inaudible. It is logical to conclude thus ---- for at the human level how could we possibly say we had a relationship with someone we had never seen and never had a conversation with? The difficulties are never far from the surface throughout the whole of the Jewish Scriptures --Old Testament --- which leads – of course --- to the incarnation --- the coming of God to dwell in our midst in the person of Jesus. Now God is both visible and audible --- and now the door to true relationship is opened as God makes his nature plain for all to see.

Psalms 145 is one of the Psalms which, in lyrical splendour extols the virtues and the nature of God. Gracious and merciful; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love --- the list begins thus and goes on in the same vein. The song of praise ends affirming that God fulfils the desire of those who fear him. He hears their cry and saves them, watching over all who love him.

But – as is most typical in the Psalms --- there has to be a note of warning for the ungodly. The wicked he will destroy says the Psalmist before he rounds the whole thing up with the declaration that he – who is not wicked --- will speak the praise of God and bless his holy name for ever. The phrase “fear the Lord” features regularly through the Old Testament and its close association here with the destruction of the wicked naturally leads us to suppose that here --- as in Sparta --- the Kingdom is ultimately ruled and controlled by fear and when the Apostle Paul adopts this phrase and speaks of the fear of the Lord --- he uses the Greek word Phobos --- drawn from the name of the twin brother of terror. Upon that there has been built a whole theological idea that it is terror of the Lord which should cause us to behave ourselves – and so avoid eternal damnation. The

Church has been very successful, over the centuries, in its promotion of that idea, through which the Church has garnered great wealth and power.

But how does that sit with the rest of the picture painted by the Psalmist and how – more emphatically --- does it sit with God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ? The answer – of course – is that it does not sit well or comfortably --- indeed it seems to fly in the face of it.

Go back however to the Hebrew words translated as “fear” and to how that word was then understood – and a very different picture emerges. In truth the Hebrew words refer not to a terror of God but to a reverence for God --- an awe in the presence of God --- because God is so uniquely different to anything else. The fear of the Lord of which the Hebrews speak is much closer then to the actions of Peter --- who when confronted with Jesus miracle of giving him a huge catch of fish --- falls to his knees and says “Go away from me Lord; for I am a sinful man.” In other words - -- I am not fit to be in your presence mighty one. Jesus, of course displays all the inclusive compassion and encouragement of God by then inviting the same Peter to be his right-hand man. This is the nature of God --- and it is this same nature which God displays in Christ as Jesus says, “You give them something to eat!” The tiny portion is enough to transform the whole --- when the Kingdom of God is present --- as it most surely is in Jesus.

God’s kingdom exists, is controlled by and survives through grace – the kind of grace of which the Psalmist sings so fulsomely – and in which Jesus trusted as he blessed five loaves and two fish then fed the whole crowd. This is the God who calls you into relationship with him – not through terror – but through grace. Hence my mouth will sing the praise of the Lord – and all flesh – in God’s own time – will bless his holy name.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen