

intro me

If you've been around Hope City for any length of time, you'll know our hope and our vision is to engage everyone in sharing the hope we have in Jesus - but that's a real challenge for many of us; probably for most of us. We ran a survey a while back asking what specifically held people back, trying to understand more clearly why this is such a struggle.

Nearly half of the answers that day centred on fear, on being afraid of what might happen, of what people would think or say or do in response. And I think fear is a huge challenge for us as we think about sharing our faith - it is for me. I'm often afraid. And that absolutely does close my mouth when it should be open.

Now if you're not a follower of Jesus here today, please understand, if I was making the rules, if most of the Christians here today were making the rules, then an urgent call to share our faith just wouldn't be one of them.

We'd write marching orders for ourselves like "be spiritual; be nice; keep your head down; do good; don't rock the boat." that'd do nicely, right? I'd definitely sign up for that. But we don't get to write our orders - Jesus, the one we call Lord does - that what it means for him to be Lord.

This whole sharing your faith thing, it's absolutely his idea, his command. And he didn't just leave it as a minor footnote in the small print that you could easily overlook, or label it an optional extra for the keen beans. His parting words to his first followers just don't leave us the wiggle-room to get around this being a central command: go and make disciples Mt 28:18-20

Matthew 28:18–20 NIV

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

And for the record, it's Jesus' command, his priority because he loves you and wants what's best for you - Jn 3:16 - that's why he came - and that's why he sent us after you!

John 3:16 NIV

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

But fear is an absolutely huge problem for us as we try to carry out that command,

take up that mission. And as we'll see from today's passage, this is nothing new! Perhaps that's somewhat encouraging: if you've felt this fear, know that even Jesus' first followers, even his twelve key disciples - those who walked with him and talked with him, who saw him work wonders did too.

In fact, from the way Jesus talks, it seems they weren't just afraid, they were absolutely petrified! They were so terrified Jesus has to challenge them sharply again and again to overcome that fear when he's giving them marching orders here.

Now, when we dig in, and think about what is it specifically that we're actually afraid of, here, in our day, I think it mostly comes down to the relational cost of trying to share what we believe: others thinking we're weird, ditching us as friends, calling us names, even hating us.

Jesus' first disciples had much more serious reasons to be afraid, though: being hated was just the ground floor for them. Jesus, in the section we looked at at the tail of last year, set out a whole laundry list of reasons for them to be afraid: they'd be betrayed, arrested, imprisoned, beaten, even killed. For them, fear seems pretty reasonable, right?

But even though it might be reasonable, Jesus is going to tell us today that we need to get over it. Why? Well, that's going to take a bit of unpacking. For one thing, he tells us there's something much worse to fear instead. But I'm getting ahead of myself..

We've been out of Matthew's gospel, his telling of the story of Jesus, for quite a while now so let me give you a little context before we dive back in.

- After some Christmassy opening chapters - angels and magi and the like - we saw John and then Jesus calling everyone to 'repent' - to change direction, to turn back towards God - because the kingdom of heaven - God's rule and reign - has come near.
- We worked through the famous Sermon on the Mount: *Jesus teaching with authority* how we should live - how God is going to turn this world upside down by turning our hearts upside down.
- Then we followed Jesus *acting with authority*: showing his authority over sickness, evil spirits, nature, even death - and over sin.
- Finally we began to look at how Jesus sends out his disciples - *sending them with authority*, sending them to share his message.

That's where we pick up the story - part way through Jesus' launch plan for those first twelve disciples - he's just warned them of the dangers, the opposition they'll be facing. What next? Well, let's read together. We're in Matthew chapter 10 and starting at verse 26 - page 975 in these blue bibles. Matthew chapter 10 - big 10 - verse 26. Tiny 26. And Ginger's reading for us this morning. Page 975. [get off stage]

Matthew 10:26–31 NIV

"So do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be

disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Lots of imperatives, lots of commands Jesus underlines for his first followers here - and for us, too - let's pick them out: **don't be afraid; speak; proclaim; don't be afraid ... be afraid .. then finally, don't be afraid.**

What is going on here? And what does it mean for us?

First we need to see that speaking is Jesus' central concern. Did you notice that? Lots about getting our fears in check - but to what end? Speak. Proclaim. And that's interesting because when Jesus sends out these twelve he's given them a whole laundry list of things to do - look back to v8 Mt 10:8

Matthew 10:8 NIV

Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

Heal, raise, cleanse, exorcise (not exercise, fit ones - even if it is January - exorcise - drive out). Jesus doesn't, in this section on fear, come back round to any of these. Why not? I think it's because fear wasn't a barrier for those things in the same way - and that makes sense to me: maybe you'd get some objections, some opposition, if you're healing, cleansing, exorcising - but not much. So there's not as much to be afraid of in following those commands.

And I think that'd be true today still. Nor that much objection or opposition to privately being as spiritual as we like, and publicly being nice, doing good.

If that was enough, if this whole fearful speaking thing wasn't really that important, that essential, Jesus could have just left it there, knowing lots of good work would get done by his disciples - that they'd be spreading light, spreading joy, spreading restoration through the authority and power Jesus had given them.

But that's not enough. Speaking is critical - that's what Jesus put first on his list, in fact Mt 10:7-8 - "proclaim this message." Speaking is where fear really became a barrier for those first disciples - and so often is also a barrier for us.

Matthew 10:7-8 NIV

As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

So speaking's at the centre - that's what Jesus wants them, and us, to do. And Jesus knows full well what a barrier their fears - and ours - are in that. So let's look at the tools Jesus gave them to fight that fear - and the reasons he gives us to push

through it too.

First thing I want us to notice? Jesus isn't telling them "don't be afraid, you silly disciples because there's nothing to worry about. None of that's going to happen to you - it's just in your mind, irrational fears. It'll all be fine." He's not suggesting that at all. He's just told them they're going to be hated, betrayed, beaten, even killed. He doesn't cancel that out - in fact he almost underlines it; notice the ones they are afraid of are ones "who kill the body" - verse 28.

I think we have to take this on board. It is scary to speak about what we believe - and that's because sometimes there'll be consequences. Jesus doesn't deny that, doesn't suggest otherwise. Speaking up probably will cost us something. Just like it would cost those first disciples. Just like it did cost our Lord.

When he says "don't be afraid," - when he commands it - I don't think he's expecting them, or us, to just be able to switch that fear off - like a light: click, done. I'm not sure we even can do that. Instead, if we look at the tools he gives us, it seems he's giving us rational fuel - explanations, reasons - showing us what we fear, thought its real - at least to some extent, it's a price worth paying. I don't think the fears those disciples felt just melted away as a result of Jesus' words - I think he wanted to them to learn, even though they felt the fear, that they could, and should, do it anyway. "feel the fear - and do it anyway".

So let's unpack the tools, the fuel Jesus gives us. First, don't be afraid: everything will come out in the end Mt 10:26

Matthew 10:26 NIV

"So do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.

How does this help us not to be afraid? Although it might sound like it at first, I don't think Jesus is pointing to the last judgement here - that day when every act, every thought, every moment will be brought into the light before our holy God and be weighed by him against his perfect standard. I don't think he's saying "don't be afraid because whatever they do to you, it'll come out in the end."

More I think Jesus is pointing to the day when the truth about him will finally be plain to all. When at the last, the whole world will discover that Christians were right after all. When for those who believe, faith will finally become sight, and all doubts and questions will finally be over. When we'll be vindicated before everyone who's ever doubted or questioned or rejected us.

I think Jesus is saying to us here "don't fear because you're on the right side of history." Don't fear because this is all for-real. The Kingdom of heaven really has come near. God really does so love the world that he sent his one and only son that whoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life. Jesus really is the Messiah, the promised one: the Son of God, come to seek and save the lost. And ultimately all of this will come out.

Second, don't be afraid: they can only kill the body. Mt 10:28

| Matthew 10:28 (NIV)

| Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.

Now that might not feel like much of an encouragement. You know, telling someone “the worst that could possibly happen is that you will die” - well, actually Jesus, that’s pretty bad. I don’t particularly want to die - quite like this living thing, really!

But Jesus’ point is there’s life beyond this mortal, earthly life - this fragile and fleeting life which can be taken from us by others or just slip away in a moment. None of us knows for sure that we will see another day begin here on earth. That’s the reality, the fragility of this life we have here.

Christians bank everything on there being more than just this life. On the death of the body not being the end - but there being another body ahead for us - for our real same selves, for our soul: a resurrection body ahead. Paul, one of Jesus first followers points out how critical resurrection is for us: 1 Cor 15:13-18

1 Corinthians 15:13–18 NLT

For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. And we apostles would all be lying about God—for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave. But that can’t be true if there is no resurrection of the dead. And if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost!

We bank everything on it - and when we feel this fear, when it threatens to silence us, Jesus wants us to bring that truth into the foreground, to have us recognise and remember again that this fleeting life isn’t everything - that death, even death, would not be the end. To be logical, rational, to realise that the worst anyone can do to us is kill us - the worst thing to happen is that our body could die. Die and then be resurrected to everlasting life with Jesus and all the saints in glory. Now that’s not so bad.

The back half of this verse, though, I think it’s easy to get this wrong. Mt 10:28

| Matthew 10:28 (NIV)

| Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

On first reading, we might think the back half of this verse is a threat: like Jesus telling us “you think it’s bad having your body killed? Well that’s nothing - [wag finger] you’d better do what I say and speak or God is going to destroy not just your body but your soul too.” Did you read it that way? as a threat?

I don’t think that makes any sense - especially given what follows - but we’ll get to that in a moment. Consider this: if it really was a threat to the disciples, “speak or be destroyed,” Jesus would be establishing a new Law that must be obeyed by disciples in order to live. It would be in conflict with our God of grace who, as Jesus tells us,

"desires mercy not sacrifice". "The LORD is gracious and compassionate," we're told.

I don't think it makes any sense to read this as a threat - but it is obviously a comparison. I think Jesus wants his disciples to weigh up the cost to them of speaking in the face of opposition with the benefit to those who'll listen, moving the focus off of ourselves. The cost could be death of the body of those who speak in the most extreme case. But the benefit is life now and forever for those who hear and respond.

When Jesus tells us that God holds our life now and forever in his hands, he's telling us the truth. That's why Jesus' message which disciples are to speak out and proclaim is so important: it's the message that opens the door from death to life to those who will listen. That can restore our relationship with the God who made us. That's why speaking it out, not being silenced by fear, is so critical.

The second reason we can't read it as a threat to disciples is the comfort and encouragement which follows - if it was a threat, Jesus could hardly follow it with this: Mt 10:29-31

Matthew 10:29-31 NIV

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Sparrows were by far the cheapest bird on the market, "the poultry of the poor," one commentator says. I've never actually tried eating a sparrow and I'm not sure I fancy it - clearly there's not a lot of meat on them so you can see why they'd be cheap. And crunchy - maybe that's nice, I guess.

Jesus' point here is that God is *still* concerned with them - the animal, the least animal, the seemingly insignificant one. Not even one of those is outside of God's concern - not even a hair on our head - for most of us, quite numerous - is outside of God's concern. So of course he is concerned for us - we're far more valuable to him than just a hair; far more valuable to him than that smallest bird - a bird which still has his concern.

Now this is pretty amazing stuff - easy to read, easy to understand - but I think this is pretty massively hard to *believe*, to hold on to. The God who made the whole universe - everything down here, everything up there - that God is actually concerned about you. About me. About things far smaller than us, far less important - and so he is certainly concerned about us. I don't know about you, but I do find this hard to believe - wonderful; awesome - but hard to actually believe.

Imagine for a moment it's true - imagine for a moment we are way up the ladder of things God is concerned about in his universe, nowhere near the bottom; imagine we are remarkably important to him: significant, valuable.

If that is true, the all-powerful all-knowing God of the universe cares deeply about us - then that's a really good reason to quench our fears: *That* God values us, values you. Can you believe it? Fight to believe it - because it's true!

Not one sparrow will fall to the ground "outside your Father's care" - literally, this is "apart from your Father" which is perhaps not as specific as we would like. Does that mean apart from his active will and choice - he makes it happen? Or his permissive consent - he allows it to happen? Or his knowledge? Or his presence? Jesus just says "apart from your Father" so I think our translation has done a good job here with the somewhat cautious phrasing "outside your Father's care."

Speak, proclaim, Jesus commands - don't be afraid, don't be silent - because our Father cares. Now we have to see that doesn't mean nothing bad - or even bad-seeming - will ever happen. The sparrows here *are* falling to the ground; that's almost certainly a picture of them dying, exactly what these disciples were afraid of. Jesus doesn't say "my Father cares - so the sparrows always fly away - they're never going to get you." He tells us our Father cares - and he with us in it. Nothing happens to us apart from Him, only with Him. He never never leaves us, never never forsakes us.

I don't know what you are facing today. I don't know what might be making you afraid - but Jesus wants us to take comfort in this: nothing can happen to us apart from our Father. And do you see it's *Father* - not God, not the One, not leaving room for it to feel distant - but Father. Parents, do you feel for, do you care for your children? Then you have an insight here, a glimpse, a fragmentary picture of what it means that nothing can happen to us apart from our Father.

Our time is gone. But I think we're there. What should we take away from Jesus' words this morning?

- There's a centrality to **speaking**, to proclaiming the message about Jesus. Perhaps you're not very comfortable in doing that? Perhaps you've never really done that. We have our 'share your story labs' coming up which are designed to help with this - look in the app and register. Do it today.
- There's an urgency to **respond** to the message about Jesus, a reason it needs to be proclaimed - because there's a real heaven and a real hell. If you don't fully understand his message yet, if you've never really responded to it, we have 'uncover' coming up, a short course exploring what Jesus has to say for yourself with some trusted guides - look in the app and register. Do it today.
- There's fear in many of our hearts - and it's not entirely unreasonable - there are things to be afraid of, consequences to speaking, and Jesus doesn't claim any different. But he does call us to weigh things up; to **realise** a day is coming when all will be laid bare. That all will finally see who Jesus is. That those who don't know Jesus will face God's judgement without the mercy we're offered through Jesus.
- There's fear in many of our hearts - but we need to **believe** that we are precious to God, valued by Him, and nothing - nothing happens to us apart from God's care - even if we die. Even if we die, He is with us.

So take a risk this year. Speak. Proclaim. Feel the fear - but do it anyway.

Let's pray.