

# Fear not!

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's share our prayer together. Heavenly Father, we humbly bow in your presence.

! May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your great glory our supreme concern.!  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Amen. I'm not a very good bird watcher. My usual bird identification technique is to hope that it sits still long enough for me to get out my phone and Google some likely candidates.

Since the birds usually don't, then most of what I see I categorise as small brown bird. Since identifying things is out, I usually settle for counting the big obvious birds on the lock near us in Holyrood Park.

So a typical haul might be six ducks, a pair of grey-legged geese, a moorhen, and three small brown birds. And the other week I was walking by Samara's Lock and I was doing quite well on the counting.

[ 1 : 12 ] Three tufted ducks, five mallards, and two Canada geese. It was a very calm, very cold winter's morning. So the only noises were the ones that the birds and I were making.

The dabbling of ducks in the water. My own footsteps crunching on the path. Jackdaws, three of them, tapping away at the small amount of ice that had formed along the water's edge.

As I rounded a corner, I heard this incredible chattering from the trees in front of me. It was a constant, ever-shifting, chirping, and tweeting.

It was from two trees, one on either side of the path. And it seemed to be coming first from one, and then from the other. From overhead, and then off to one side.

It took me a moment to spot what was making it. Of course, it was some small brown birds. But more of them than I could possibly count.

[ 2 : 14 ] And moving quicker than I could count, too. Were there six, seven, a dozen, or just a handful, repeatedly flitting from branch to branch? Aha, I thought.

Here are the many sparrows that Jesus says were worth more than. More than. But when I looked closer, and when I got my phone out and checked, I realised that these small brown birds weren't sparrows at all.

They were, I eventually realised, chif-chaffs. Which I would try and describe to you, but really, they are just small brown birds. Now, the twitchers among you might recognise that as being somewhat unusual.

Because chif-chaffs are usually solitary birds. They're territorial. They don't flock together. But, as it turns out, when I looked them up, they do sometimes flock during the winter.

The rest of the year, when they're on their own, they can hide from predators, among leaves and hedgerows and so on. But in winter, the branches are much bearer. So they can't use them as cover.

[ 3 : 19 ] And instead, they gather together in groups to get safety in numbers. And the constant chirping that I heard that first drew my attention to them is part of that.

It allows the chif-chaffs to keep track of where the group is, see who's in it, to come and join it if they're far off, and stick together without having to spend time both looking for predators and food and each other.

By using the sound, they can save how they use their eyes. And it's the singing together and the singing to each other that lets them feed together without fear.

It means that even in harsh winter conditions, without their usual hiding places, they can venture out and forage without being afraid. And it's that sense of going out fearlessly that Jesus is trying to instill in his disciples in today's reading.

He tells them three times, have no fear. Do not fear. Fear not. And remember, as we've been exploring these past few weeks, this comes as part of his instructions to his disciples going out on mission.

[ 4 : 35 ] He is not just giving them the familiar angel's reassurance, do not be afraid, in general. He is much more specifically telling them to not be afraid when they are sent out on mission.

To go out and sing out fearlessly in a frightening world, even as small brown birds can sing out in winter. The first time that Jesus tells his disciples to not be afraid is in saying, so have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispers, proclaim on the housetops. The them that Jesus is telling his disciples not to fear, the opponents and the persecutors that he mentioned in last week's reading, those who react negatively to the disciples' mission, those who reject and scorn them.

And very often in life, we are concerned with how other people might react to us, and not without good reason. But here Jesus is saying to not worry about how people might react, and to instead focus on being sincere, to focus on there being a continuity between our inner selves and our outer selves, between our faith and how we act in the world.

Jesus is telling the disciples that there is not a distinction between what they hear privately and what they say publicly. So there is not one thing that's hidden and something else that's revealed.

[ 6 : 20 ] There's not something that we hear in the dark and something else that we say in the light. There's not one thing that we do in church on Sunday and something else that we do the rest of the week.

Jesus is encouraging an openness and an honesty about faith here. An openness and an honesty about God. And that openness about God comes from God in the first place.

God is honest with creation about God's self. God reveals God's self in Jesus, is made known in Jesus. So when Jesus is talking about hidden things being revealed and made known, he's talking about the process of God being revealed to humanity.

And Jesus is the incarnation, he's himself foundational to that process. He is that process, the way, the truth, the light. And Jesus teaching his disciples is a part of that process too.

And the disciples being sent out on mission to teach others is also part of that process of revealing. And we, in making known what is hidden, in proclaiming what we have heard whispered, can also be part of that process of revealing.

[ 7 : 47 ] The openness, the revealing, the proclaiming from rooftops that Jesus calls us to is part of God's own openness, revealing and proclaiming. The mission that we're being sent on is the very mission of God.

And for us, this means being open about our faith and not treating it as something that's private or hidden. I think of the tree of chif-chafs again.

And you've probably seen the same thing when a gang of sparrows takes up residence in a hedge or a bush. They're very noisy. You can usually hear them chirping and tweeting over the sound of the traffic.

They adjust their noise so they can be heard. And they're very clearly signaling that this here is a bush full of sparrows. And there's no way that their neighbors can mistake it for anything else.

If you've got a tree of sparrows next door, you know that you've got a tree of sparrows next door. What if we were to live our lives like that? So that just as people know when there's a bunch of sparrows about, they also know when there's a bunch of Christians about.

[ 8 : 58 ] One way that I've always tried to do this is just by dropping church into conversation, by making it part of the sparrows' chatter, as it were.

Back when I worked outside the church, most of my colleagues weren't Christian, and still most of my friends aren't. So when they ask, what did you get up to at the weekend? Then church on Sunday and a bit of what was going on would be part of my response.

It's a way of reminding people that just like sparrows, there are Christians about. And you might be surprised by some of the connections that that makes, some of the conversations that it leads to. Certainly in my experience, it's led to some interesting conversations with friends, including over board games. I can vouch for that. You won't know that there are other Christians out there or people who are interested in becoming Christians unless they hear the birdsong signalling that here is one.

And remember, that's how the Chif Chats, who are normally solitary, signal to each other to form a flock, by chattering and chirping so that they can stick together.

[10:14] Who knows who else we might draw into the flock? It's the hearing each other, it's the knowing that others are there that lets those small brown birds go out and feed in the wintertime without fear.

The second time that Jesus tells his disciples to not be afraid is in verse 28.

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell. Again, Jesus is telling his disciples to not be afraid of those who might oppose or persecute them in the course of their mission.

He is pointing out that there is more at stake than they know. That the difficulties they might face in mission, however much they may see matters of life or death, pale into insignificance once they understand the true perspective of things.

They are not simply dealing with the ordinary things of life but with the totally extraordinary things of God on a scale larger than they can imagine.

[11:31] There's a story back from when Christianity was first coming into this part of the world that's about trying to come to terms with the scale of God and eternity.

And it's got a sparrow in it. In those days, back in the 7th century, the Lothians were part of the Kingdom of Northumbria which stretched all the way from West Lothian down to about Sheffield. And as a Yorkshireman living in Edinburgh, I'm always glad to find connections between those two places. The King of Northumbria, Edwin, had converted to Christianity and his court were debating the merits of following him in doing so.

One of his chief advisors in trying to understand eternal life compared a man's life to a sparrow flying through the King's feasting hall in winter.

The nobles are gathered, the fire is kindled, the hall is warm while outside it rains and snows and chucks it down. A sparrow finds its way in one door and it flips across the hall and then darts out by another window.

[12:42] While the sparrow's inside, it's not touched by the winter outside. But that's only for a short period of time, for the twinkling of an eye, the man says. It's soon out in the cold again.

In such a way, the advisor said, the life of man appears for a brief moment. What comes before and what will follow after, we do not know. So if this new doctrine offers anything more certain, we should follow it.

And as Christians, we do have something more certain about what will follow after. Jesus has gone through death and back and brings us a promise of eternal life.

And here, in this teaching, Jesus is giving the disciples a reminder that they are players in a bigger cosmic drama than they know. He is reminding them that the outside of the hall exists.

Because it's easy when we're within the hall, within the world, to be distracted by the warmth and the light, the food, the drink, the merry company, and to think that maybe that that's all that there is, that that's all that matters.

[13:56] And if all that matters is what's within the hall, within the world we see, then the difficulties of mission seem very great indeed. If all we have is within the hall, then it makes sense to be afraid of whatever might bring that to an end.

It makes sense to be afraid of what might disrupt our enjoyment of the feast. What if mission means that we have to move away from the warm seats by the fire?

What if it means the awkwardness of talking to someone at one of the other tables that we don't know? What if it means going into the kitchen to help prepare the feast? But on the scale that Jesus wants the disciples to think on, these difficulties become unimportant.

They are being brought into God's own mission of self-revelation. An eternal life in Jesus is not being a sparrow going out into the winter's cold, but rather being a guest at a greater, grander feast. The difficulties of this life, the ups and downs of mission, the stresses and strains of Christian life are only a small section, only little dips in a much longer flight path.

[15:19] The true picture is in many ways really the opposite of the Northumbria advisor's story. Really, we are sparrows who might, for a short time, have to dart out into the winter's cold.

But then we will be welcomed into the heavenly banquet, safe and warm and dry forevermore. The third time that Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid is in saying, are not two sparrows sold for a penny and not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father?

But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows. We are of more value than many sparrows.

God cares for all of creation and takes delight even in the smallest things, in sparrows, in shift chaffs, in twigs, in dunnocks and chaffinches, in small brown birds of every kind.

And we are part of God's creation. And so God delights in us. Like a sparrow, we are a small part of a vast and beautiful cosmos of whirling galaxies and countless stars.

[16:42] But within all that vastness, God cares for the smallest part of it, each of us and every sparrow. But we are of more value than many sparrows.

God cares for all of humanity so much that God became one. God chose to come into the world by becoming one of us. Our human flesh is the flesh that God took on in Jesus.

And we are made in God's image. God has chosen humanity to be stewards of creation. And so we are part of humanity and God delights in us and every person of whatever race or nation.

Remember, Jesus is talking to his disciples in the context of mission and telling them to not be afraid because in that mission they are of more value than many sparrows.

God has a care for creation and a care for all of humanity and also a care for those on God's mission. In going out, in proclaiming what has been hidden, the disciples are being made a part of God's revelation.

[17:59] Their mission is part of God's mission which is why Jesus is reminding the disciples of their value in God's eyes. And this is precisely why they should not be afraid because God will care for them.

When we face difficulties in mission of whatever kind, God will care for us and enable us to endure them and surpass them.

So we do not need to be afraid. Whether we find it difficult to sing out clear as a bird to signal that we are part of God's flock.

Whether we find it difficult to contemplate the magnitude and mystery of eternal life. Whether we find it difficult to know that we are loved.

God will care for us. We are of more value than many sparrows. More than two sparrows being sold for a penny.

[19:01] More than a sparrow flying through a feasting hall. More than sparrows or chiv-traps flocking and chattering in a tree. God cares for us and for our work as God's people.

And so we should not fear. Let us pray. Lord, we ask for your spirit to strengthen us and encourage us to give us courage in the face of fear.

To give us community that strengthens us. To give us wisdom and determination to sing your song in the world. Because we know that you care for us.

We ask that you would make your care known to us and to those around us. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.