

FEAR – SPACE FOR NEW CONFIDENCE

On that day, when evening had come, [Jesus] said to [his disciples], 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

MARK 4:35–41 (see also MARK 1:14–20)

The story of Jesus asleep in the storm-tossed boat is well known. It has been trawled by many a preacher, who, in their sermons, release their catch of good points to their congregations who leave church knowing they must not be anxious or afraid, and must trust Jesus who calms every storm of life. And yet, when they get home, it will take only a phone call to dislodge the message of the sermon, and once again they are nervously grasping the side of a rocking boat wondering whether their God really will come to their rescue, or whether he might as well be a sleeping deity in the midst of a human storm.

To help me envisage this story, I find it easier to home in on one of the disciples, so I am going to think about how this event might have been for Andrew. He is Peter's brother and we know he is a fisherman

and therefore he is familiar with this world of boats, lakes and storms. He is quite happy to launch out into the lake as night falls. In the old days, when he worked this lake for fish, he was often out in the hours of darkness. Perhaps, on this occasion, they are using his boat. So there he is back in his familiar world, shipping Jesus and his friends to the other side of the lake. But then it happens. He knows the signs – that familiar disturbance of air that will all too quickly become a squall, tossing the boat on the heaving lake. Heavy raindrops spatter into the wooden craft. His friends pull their thick robes over themselves for shelter. It is now so dark that it is hard to make out who's who on the boat. Andrew has steered his boat through many a storm before now, but this looks like being a mean one, and, as luck would have it, they are as far from shore as is possible on this great lake. But he is in charge of this boat, and he must get them to land as fast as he can.

Yet, try as he might, Andrew cannot get control of his boat, and he begins to realise that he is losing the battle against this storm. Peter is shouting something at him and others are screaming advice. In the storm-force wind, the raindrops feel sharp and fierce even on his rugged face. He has always been a strong and courageous man, but he feels such courage drain from him in the face of this gale.

He feels fear in his guts. And he has every right to be afraid; his life is in real danger. He passes a rope to Peter and struggles his way to the stern past the others, who are all shouting things now. Jesus has done some pretty impressive things in recent days; surely he can help? But when he gets to the stern of the boat, he is astonished to find Jesus curled up and fast asleep on the fishing nets! The boat is tossing around like an untamed donkey. Water is drenching Jesus, but even that doesn't wake him. Andrew clambers closer and grasps his arm. Ever since he had chosen to follow this Jesus of Nazareth, the world had become such a safe place for him. This rabbi demonstrated again and again how much he cared for people. Andrew was getting to the point where he really did believe that he truly was the Son of God, the Messiah for whom his people had

longed with such a desperate and deep yearning. But what use was it having the Son of God in your boat if all he could do was sleep when you really needed him? Surely you should not have to rouse God from his slumbers?

In desperation, Andrew shakes Jesus by the shoulders and screams at him to wake up. It's difficult to see his face in this thick darkness and if he is going to say anything it will be nigh impossible to hear him above the roar of the storm. 'Teacher, don't you care about us?' Andrew yells accusingly. Jesus eventually wakes and somehow or other he manages to stand up on this wildly pitching boat and gazes out to sea, unperturbed by the rain slashing at his face. Andrew is clinging to the straining mast and looks beseechingly at Jesus. Then he hears an angry cry from his master – Jesus is shouting not at those in the boat but at the very storm itself. He is commanding it to stop! Before Andrew has a chance to think about how ridiculous a notion this is, the storm abruptly dies. The wind and rain cease from their violence, and waves that only moments before were as mountains become a still plain. The boat calms and the only sound is the gentle water lapping against its wooden frame. A thin band of light appears on the horizon as Jesus turns and looks at Andrew and says, not with accusation but with genuine curiosity, 'Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?' It is a question that is as disturbing as the storm.

Thankfully, most of us do not have to face the kind of terror that Andrew faced, but nonetheless we all know the power of fear. Anxiety is a close relative of fear and regularly stalks the human heart, robbing it of its peace. Even if we have never been at sea in a storm, we can relate to this well-known story. Every journey of faith will have its times of real testing, where to all intents and purposes it feels like God is fast asleep and we are left on our own to face the buffeting storms of life that make us so anxious and afraid. If we were able to talk to Andrew today, I guess he would look at us with real understanding and sympathy. And then he might smile and say, 'Well, in the end he *did* wake up. The calming of the storm was breath

taking. It was almost terrifying to see his power. But do you know what I remember most? It was the look on his face when he asked, "Have you still no faith?" It was the love that shifted our fear that night, not the power. It beckoned something from us.'

He might well advise us that the healing of our fears is not wrought by grabbing God's attention so he can sort out the storms that assail us. It is about discovering that his restful presence is in every storm-tossed moment of our lives. We and the world we inhabit may feel like they are in frightening turmoil at times. But there is one who is greater than the storm, whose peace is unmoved by the turbulence and terrors of this world. Confidence grows in us when we catch sight of the watery eyes of love that beckon forth from our own hearts a voice of faith that lets the storm know, in no uncertain terms, just who is in charge.

Reflection

What storm of life is making you anxious today? Try breathing deeply and then imagine you are drawing the peace of Christ into that place of anxiety. Then try telling that storm just who is in charge!

Prayer

When the storms of fear rise and threaten to swamp me, let me feel your peace, O my Saviour, and from that stillness let faith rise through the storm.

CHANGE – SPACE FOR NEW VISION

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

MATTHEW 1:18–25 (see also MATTHEW 2)

Techniques on how to manage change are now big business, because it is widely recognised that, generally speaking, humans do not manage it well, and so we need help. To lead people through a process of change, you have to help them let go of something they find precious in order to embrace something new that they may know little about. People understandably find it difficult to abandon something they cherish if they are far from certain about what the future holds. It is okay if you have been part of choosing the

change, but change that is foisted upon you can stir strong feelings of anger and resentment. The changes that are not of our making are often unwelcome. A redundancy means we have to change to a new job and perhaps a new town; children go to university and we have to face a home that is far too quiet without them; a church gets a new minister who changes much loved customs; someone we love becomes unexpectedly pregnant and our world changes dramatically. That was the change a first-century Nazarene carpenter had to face.

As far as we know, there was nothing to mark out Joseph from the other guys in town. Everyone was thrilled when he and Mary became betrothed – they seemed so right for each other. They were the perfect couple. Joseph was not wealthy, but he had a reasonable job with his woodcraft skills. Mary came from a good and respectable family. Life would change, of course, with marriage, but this was a change Joseph was looking forward to. But then came the change he was not expecting. Mary asked to meet with him privately and told him the devastating news that she was expecting a baby. In the culture of that day, it was nothing short of disastrous. A woman could be stoned to death for bearing a child out of wedlock. She said something to Joseph about it being God's, but the thought of God fathering a child in this world was wildly fanciful, not to say heretical. It was typical of Mary to try and make something spiritual out of a difficult situation. Joseph's skill was in crafting something useful out of an unpromising block of wood. Now, because he loved Mary, he had to craft a plan that would succeed in separating himself from Mary without her facing undue disgrace and distress. His world, which once looked so safe and good, has suddenly given way to a world of great uncertainty and full of threats.

Joseph finds it hard to sleep. He thinks about this problem day and night and can get no peace of mind. But, on this particular night, he at last falls into a sound sleep. His agitated body is finally still. The storm of worries of this terrible situation has temporarily been calmed. In the secret chambers of his mind, a dream is forming. It

rises to that place just beneath the surface of consciousness. He finds himself in a place that feels sacred, for he senses a presence. He has felt it a few times in his life – the eerie yet beautiful sense of the closeness of something holy.

His body sleeps, but his soul has never been so alert as it is in these moments. In his dream world he turns, and there stands a creature more beautiful than he could dare to imagine. It is not a beauty to possess, but one to inspire him to better things. He is weeping as it speaks: 'Joseph, son of David.' He feels like his family history has been gathered up into this moment and offered before this holy creature. It speaks again and tells him that the life forming in the womb of his betrothed has been kindled by none other than the great Holy Spirit of God. His name is to be Jesus. The creature quotes a much-loved passage of scripture and says, 'God is with you.' Joseph has never felt God so close. It is in that moment of closeness that his mind slips into wakefulness with the sounds of heaven still ringing in his ears. He is changed.

Through this vision, Joseph is helped into a radically different view of the events that once seemed so disastrous. He lets go of his old views of God and how God works in this world. He lets go of his old view of Mary, and his old view of himself. As the sun rises over the Galilean hills, it is a different Joseph who walks calmly from his house to the home of Mary where, despite the shock of neighbours, he takes her as his wife and a remarkable journey of faith gets underway.

The autumn season of the soul is often marked by change, where we are letting go of something we once treasured to make space for something new. We need time to adjust to changes that come our way that are not of our choosing. Few of us will have night-time visitations of angels to help us, but the Joseph story tells us that there are heavenly resources to help with earthly problems. Another scripture tells us that we may have moments of entertaining angels without realising it.¹¹

The messengers of God come in all kinds of ways as friends, texts, tweets, books, sunsets, smiles or, indeed, dreams. We need to be on the lookout for those signs of grace, sometimes detected by something just below the surface of our conscious self, an instinct that recognises the kindly work of God to direct us on to a new path. Once we know his company on that path, our tread will be that much more sure. Joseph did not necessarily find that new road an easy one, despite the help of the angels, but I suspect he never dreamed of going back to the old ways.

Reflection

How have you reacted to unwanted change that has come your way?

Prayer

Visit me, O Lord, in the deeper recesses of my soul that I may let go of the familiar path for the sake of the new.

extraordinary faith, rooted simply in the hunch of a servant girl and the word of a discourteous prophet, he discovered a whole new vitality in his life. Being humbled in this world is never comfortable, but with a little faith, it can often make space for new growth to flourish in our lives.

Reflection

Why is it often difficult to take the humble way? What is it that we lose? But what might we gain?

Prayer

Lord, when I am humbled in life help me to find the waters of faith that I might find my freedom.

DISTURBANCE - SPACE FOR A NEW CALLING

The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chisleu, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. They replied, 'The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.'

When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. I said, 'O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments; let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned... O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!'

NEHEMIAH 1:1-6, 11

It is hard to get through a day without being disturbed by something. Among the usual disturbances of family, work and finances, there are the disturbances of world events that come as reports through our news channels. While we may do our best to brush these to one side, there are occasions where the thing that disturbs us has no intention

of being so easily dismissed. It stubbornly persists in catching our attention and conversing with us. Such a disturbance is one that carries a calling, and usually a calling that brings about a sense of autumnal vulnerability, where we feel exposed and ill equipped.

Nehemiah knew all about this. We are back in the fifth century BC in the days of the Persian Empire. Over 100 years before, Nehemiah's ancestors had been driven out of Jerusalem by foreign armies, and the survivors were captured and exiled. As time went by and new generations came on the scene, the feelings for the old country grew weaker. However, tides of homesickness still visited those Hebrew people who kept hold of their scriptures, their God and their traditions. They nursed their wound but no one knew what to do about their once glorious city that was now abandoned and in ruins.

Nehemiah held a senior position in the court of the Persian King Artaxerxes I. The book of the Bible that bears his name gets to the point straight away. We are in the month of Chislew, which is in the late autumn. It was sometimes called 'the month of dreams', and that certainly became the case for Nehemiah. He is a devout man and I imagine him dutifully going about his business in the court of the king. But there are already signs of disturbance in his heart, even though he can't quite put his finger on what it is.

Then one day, in the palace at Susa, he is sitting at his desk by the window, with the low sun highlighting his neatly cut, greying beard, when there is a knock at the door. He rises and opens it, and there is the familiar sight of his brother, Hanani, who has come with a group of men who are strangers to Nehemiah. He welcomes them into the rather grand room that serves as his office. He calls for some wine and invites his visitors to sit on the elaborate stone bench that is backed by a colourful tapestry. Hanani tells his brother that these men are from his homeland. That first reference to home causes Nehemiah to raise an eyebrow as he sits back down at his sunlit wooden desk. He leans forwards, clasping his hands and fixing his eyes on these new guests. How is the ancient city of Jerusalem?

The wine arrives and fine goblets are passed around the room as Hanani's friends tell of the once great city of the people of Israel. They spare no details, each one chipping in one horrific detail after another, painting a dismal scene of a city bereft of its former glory and stagnating as a ruin, making a mockery of the faith that once caused it to be so great. The sun-glinted goblet of wine stands untouched on Nehemiah's desk. He feels his present world is fading from him as his soul ventures into this other world so painfully detailed by these new friends. The story is awakening an unfamiliar emotion. He feels it first as a fluttering in his chest. He is one of the senior people in this palace, always careful to control his emotions, but something powerful is threatening to shatter this professional resistance. It shows first in his face, which contorts into a grimace. A grief, which feels much more than his own personal grief, is too powerful for even his resistance. Large tears break and fall to the desk while his hand instinctively rises to his mouth. He presses his knuckles to his teeth, as if such an action could hold back the force of such emotion.

He grasps the goblet, and drops of spilt wine mix with tears on the ancient desk. He gulps at the wine, hoping it will in some way provide healing to his wounded soul, but he knows that nothing will shift this aching grief for the city of God. Hanani can see that his brother needs solitude, so he and his friends make their way out, bowing as they go.

Nehemiah wipes his face on the sleeve of his robe and then paces up and down his room. His soul is in chaos, and he becomes acutely aware of the deep wound in his homeless people. Humbly, he does not sidestep his own part in this. As far as he can see, he is part of this mess, but in acknowledging this he realises that he can also be part of the healing. He gives the days that follow to fasting and prayer, and in time the nightmare becomes a dream: from the deep inner disturbance comes a sense of call. He must go and inspect the city himself. And this is the beginning of a great change of direction for Nehemiah. The king consents to this new adventure, and Nehemiah is soon on his way to Jerusalem, embarking on a grand plan of reconstruction that will restore his beloved city.

Every day we are bombarded with stories of tragedy, whether in our own neighbourhoods, or from far-off, unfamiliar lands. Usually we find ways of emotionally managing these, but occasionally we hear a story that crawls under our skin and, like with Nehemiah, it becomes a productive disturbance. A passion begins to burn and a vision unfurls that might seem ridiculous, yet will not be ridiculed. We release our protective leaves and become vulnerably open. We spend time on our knees because we know we are not up to what is required. It is here that we become aware of a call of God, beckoning us to work for rebuilding and healing in a part of his wounded world. A friend of mine called Sundar is from India and lives in Derbyshire. He thought he was always going to be an economist until one day he flicked on his TV and caught a news report from his home state about an orphan girl. Like Nehemiah, Sundar's soul was besieged by sorrow and distress, but after his own time of mourning and prayer it became clear this was the disturbance of a call of God. He and his wife gave up their safe and prosperous world. They tracked down that little girl, and set about building an orphanage for her and others in her plight. It is now a flourishing home for many rescued children.¹²

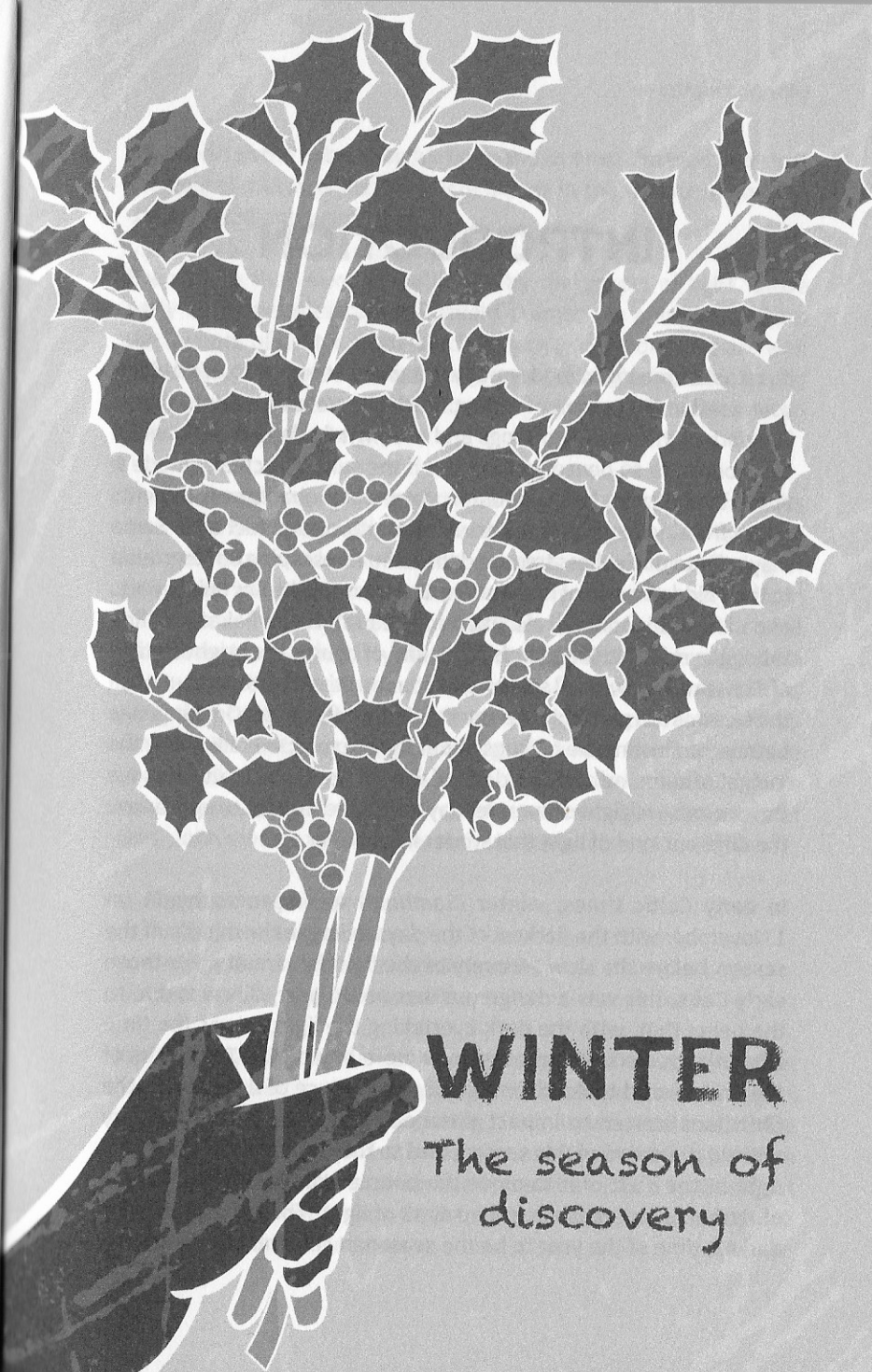
We may not like autumns of disturbance, but they may well be times when we are shaken out of our comfortable, leafy worlds, and space is created in which we hear a new calling. This can be one of the great gifts of autumn.

Reflection

What is disturbing you? Is there a message in the disturbance you need to hear?

Prayer

Lord, give me ears to hear the message in the disturbance.



WINTER

The season of
discovery