

LEAD ON

REACTIONS TO FEAR AS A LEADER

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In my recent study of the character of Peter in the gospels, I was struck by the fact that his reactions and missteps in the 24 hours leading up to Jesus' crucifixion exhibit a common underlying factor: fear. Peter is portrayed in the gospels as representative leader among the disciples, and so reflecting on this prominent leader's reactions to fear is valuable for our own formation and development as leaders. The text I have focused on particularly here is Matthew 26:31-56, 69-75.

At this point in the gospel story, Jesus has been warning his disciples about what is to come for a while. The sense of threat and intimidation from the authorities is real. Jesus is not denying it, and in fact continues to speak about it and even inflame tensions further by his teaching (I suspect the content of Matthew 23 would not have helped ease tensions). The disciples must have felt on edge, wondering what was going to happen and when it was going to happen. They must have wondered what impact it would have on them – would they be arrested, imprisoned, tortured, or killed? In the face of these tensions and questions, the presence of fear is understandable.

It is important to state that fear is not wrong in and of itself. It is an inbuilt protection mechanism given for our survival. We cannot assign blame to the presence of fear, but we can observe ways fear can be handled, and different ways people act when they are afraid (including ourselves). Sometimes we don't recognise what we feel as fear because it is masked by other feelings or behaviours (e.g. anger, depression, apathy, or drive). Part of growing in emotional maturity is recognising and naming emotions for what they really are. When we name things, we are able to face them.

Common Reactions to Fear

When we look at Peter's behaviour in this text, we can identify some common reactions to fear along with reasons for these reactions.

BRAVADO

The first reaction to fear we see is bravado. 'Peter said to him, "Even if all fall away because of you, I will never fall away"' (v.33). Note how Peter compares himself favourably with others. This is already a sign of the



danger of bravado. When we boast in our abilities in comparison to others, we are on dangerous ground.

Note also the presence of absolutes: “I will NEVER.” Absolutes reveal a lack of humility. How do we know we will NEVER or ALWAYS do anything? Peter is grasping for certainty with this absolute statement because fear brings uncertainty, and humans don't like this feeling. We try and feel more certain, more in control, by asserting absolute statements. Peter goes on to say, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you” (v.35), committing himself to a future act he does not understand and is not prepared for. He does not know his own limits and frailties.

Peter is also directly contradicting Jesus. Jesus has just said that Peter will deny him three times and Peter refuses to believe it. Bravado blinds us to the truth that others speak and the reality of our own fragility.

WITHDRAWAL

The second reaction to fear is found in vv.40-45 and can be described as withdrawal or disassociation. When we read this account, we can make the mistake of thinking that Peter, James and John fell asleep because they were physically tired, were lazy, or hadn't had enough coffee. But I suspect something else is going on here under the surface.

Jesus is now deeply agitated and grieved and tells his friends how he is feeling. What must Peter and the others have felt at this disclosure? Here was their Lord and Master, their strong rabbi who walked on water and raised the dead and delivered people from sickness and the demonic, now very agitated and grieved. I imagine that fear was a very real response to these difficult moments.

The image of the disciples sleeping could hardly be one of restful slumber because they were at peace, rather I suspect it was a way of them coping with their fear by withdrawing from the situation and disassociating. Even when they had been woken and reminded of their charge to pray, they fell back into their sleep, ‘for their



eyes were heavy.’ Perhaps their eyes were a window into their souls. Instead of prayerful vigilance, Peter and his companions chose the seeming safety and comfort of withdrawal in sleep in order to cope with the fear and danger they felt.

This too is a danger we face when we feel fear. It is all too easy to withdraw and disassociate from the discomfort we feel rather than keep a watchful posture of prayer. Today we have a plethora of ‘sleeping’ responses to choose from (described as ‘numbing’ practices by some), and one of the most pernicious is our screens.

It is so easy to numb ourselves into a stupor of sleep where we no longer feel the sharpness of fear or pain because we have spent hours on social media or playing games or doom-scrolling the news or online shopping. We can also numb ourselves with substances like food or alcohol, to enable withdrawal away from the reality of fear. But whether it is physical sleep or the numbing of our fears through screens or substances, the call of Jesus remains the same: Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

VIOLENCE

The third reaction to fear we see in Peter is violence, when he draws his sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest's slave (v.51). Peter is not named as the disciple in this account, but is later named in John's gospel. This response to fear is the exercise of power through violence that intimidates and damages others. In Peter's case the violence was physical – the swipe of a sword – but there are other kinds of violence that people also resort to when threatened by fear. These can include verbal, emotional, sexual, psychological, and spiritual abuse.

Often, we don't recognise the presence of fear in the motives of those who resort to violence, but it is very often present and undiagnosed, firstly by the individual and also by others. When people hold power over others, fear can lead to the use of that power to protect themselves at the expense of others. This misuse of power is abuse.

Fears that can lead to violence include fear of loss of power or control or relationship or reputation, fear of financial loss, and fear of pain or failure or vulnerability or death. Jesus knows the fear that is resident in our hearts, and knew the fear that Peter felt. But he didn't excuse Peter's behaviour as an acceptable response in the face of fear. He unequivocally condemned this response of violence (vv.52-53). Jesus warns Peter and us that violence perpetuated leads to violence

experienced. The use of power to abuse others in order to protect ourselves is never sanctioned by Jesus, no matter the reality of the fear we face.

DENIAL

The final response to fear that Peter demonstrates is what Jesus predicted: denial (vv.70-74). Not once, not twice, but three times Peter's fear drove him to deny knowledge of the man he had earlier sworn he would NEVER deny. Note the increasing intensity of the fear-driven denial too as Jesus is dismissed as 'the man' along with the invoking of curses and oaths. And Jesus had earlier expressly forbidden his disciples to swear oaths in his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:33-37). Repeatedly Jesus told them "do not swear" [by anything], and that anything more than "yes, yes" or "no, no" was from the evil one.

Fear has resulted in Peter taking his lead from the evil one rather than the teaching of Jesus. Of course, we would never do that, would we? We might look at Peter and think, 'how could he get it so wrong?' But in the face of challenge or persecution or threat, how might we be tempted to tone down our affiliation with or following of Jesus? When what we believe becomes culturally unacceptable, how do we respond? When we feel the fear of rejection or ridicule, what are we tempted to deny? These are questions we must be willing to reflect upon.

What Leads to These Behaviours

Along with recognising these responses to fear, it is important to consider why these responses come about.

What was it in Peter (and in us) that leads to these kinds of behaviours?

LACK OF SELF-AWARENESS

The first reason is a lack of self-awareness. Peter clearly was unaware of his limitations and weaknesses. One moment he swears he will NEVER deny Jesus, and a short while later he has denied him three times, with swearing.

This lack of self-awareness led to the response of bravado: overpromising and underdelivering. The same can be true of us as followers of Jesus and leaders in his Church. Lack of self-awareness can lead to us promising with our mouth what we are simply unable to follow-through on because of our limitations. This is why growth in self-awareness is such a vital part of growing as a leader.

This self-awareness comes through listening to Jesus: after all, Jesus was very aware of Peter's frailty, and warned him about it. When we listen to the words of Jesus (even when they are challenging and uncomfortable) we are able to grow in awareness of self. And it is worth bearing in mind that Jesus speaks through his written word, and through his Church by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus demonstrated perfect self-awareness in the face of fear, understanding his calling even in the midst of the horror that was to come. He knew the power that he had, but refused to exercise it to protect himself, rather choosing to submit himself to God's plan for the salvation of others.



LACK OF UNDERSTANDING THE BIG PICTURE

The second reason is lack of understanding of the big picture. Peter failed to see the big picture of God's redemptive work through Jesus. Even though Jesus had taught his disciples about his death and the fact that he would be raised again, they had not understood (we can't be too harsh on them, however, because we always read with the benefit of hindsight – we weren't there in the middle of it!). This can also be true of us.

When we are in darkness and difficulty, we can struggle to see the big picture and therefore react out of fear. The big picture is not just the big picture of our lives, but of the kingdom of God and the redemptive story of God's work in Jesus Christ. When we focus only on the smaller details, they can be frightening, which is why we need to lift our eyes to remind ourselves regularly of where we are in the story, and what the end of the story looks like. Jesus gives us the perfect example of seeing and acting from the perspective of the big picture. Jesus knew the Scriptures (vv. 31, 54, 56), he knew the Father's plan, and he kept his eyes on the picture that was given to him by his Father as he fulfilled his Father's will.

LACK OF TRUST IN JESUS

The third reason for these reactions to fear is lack of trust in Jesus. Peter struggled with his responses to fear because he struggled to trust Jesus. He struggled to trust Jesus' teaching and promises for the future. He struggled to trust Jesus' words and insights into his frailties. He struggled to trust Jesus with his safety. He struggled to trust Jesus with his life. Because of this struggle of trust, Peter did not trust Jesus with his fears and instead chose other ways of responding. How often do we respond to fear because of a lack of trust in Jesus?

Recognising lack of trust is not about assigning blame, shame, or guilt, but rather acknowledging areas in need of healing and growth in relationship. Jesus, in contrast to Peter, demonstrates perfect trust in his Father when he prays, even in his anguish, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want" (v.39). Jesus faces his fear (he doesn't hide it or ignore it) and brings it to his Father, fully trusting his future into his Father's hands.

SELF PROTECTION

The final reason we can see behind Peter's responses to fear is self-protection. Lack of trust in Jesus means that Peter has to do the work of protecting himself. Even if we give Peter the benefit of the doubt and think his chopping off of the servant's ear was an attempt to protect Jesus, his denial that swiftly follows shows that he is in full self-protection mode.

When we think it is up to us to protect ourselves, our responses to fear include bravado, withdrawal, violence, and denial. It's us against the world so we put up every defence we can muster. Jesus shows us a different way. Instead of self-protection, he chooses self-giving, and trusts his Father to provide the ultimate protection he needs: resurrection from death.

A Better Way

This journey of Peter's seems bleak, but he arrives at the best point for change to happen: bitter tears through coming face to face with reality (v.75).

The moment we come face-to-face with the reality of ourselves is painful, but it also offers the possibility of change. Only when Peter acknowledged his fear and failure was he able to be open to hear and respond to the call of Jesus once again. And we know that Jesus will call again, because along with prophesying his death, and the denial and desertion of Peter and the other disciples, Jesus also promises that he will be raised, and that he will go ahead of his disciples to Galilee (vv.31-32). Fear does not have the final word in Peter's story. Nor does it in ours.

REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS

- Which of the common reactions are you most likely to succumb to?
- What's the main driver for that reaction for you?
- What would facing your fear look like for you?

