

WEEK I

**'I'm trying to get you to realise
you need not be governed by fear.'**



TO START YOU THINKING

God's opening gambit

‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield.’ (Genesis 15:1)

Read

Genesis 15:1-6

Should you happen to have time on your hands one day, a trawl through the Old Testament can be very instructive. You will discover a fair amount of blood and bludgeoning, a great deal of dodgy tribal ethics, a few salacious bits they never told you in Sunday School, and a bizarre mix of flawed protagonists that may well leave you asking God, ‘Whatever were you thinking of?’

You may also discover that whenever God has a conversation with one of these dubious heroes, his opening gambit is nearly always the same: ‘Do not be afraid.’

Hardly surprising, you might think. If you came face to face with the Almighty or one of his ministering angels, you too might feel a little unnerved. But almost always God is coming right to the heart of these guys’ problems. He knows exactly where their fear is rooted.

In the case of Abram (later to be known as Abraham, the father of the Jewish people) it was his virility that was in question – a pretty deep male fear, that one. Abram had built himself up to become a tribal leader to be reckoned with. In an era when wealth was evaluated in sheep, oxen and donkeys, he was approaching millionaire status. But despite a series of promises from God that he would be the father of a great nation, he had not one child to inherit it all. Maybe his habit of passing his wife off as his sister and offering her favours to neighbouring

kings had something to do with it. One wonders what sexually-transmitted diseases were around in those days, and whether that might have been a factor. (See Genesis 12:10-20 and 20:1-18, if you really want to know) Why was he doing that? Well, out of fear, obviously. Given Sarah's evident desirability and the propensity of tribal despots to get what they wanted by any means, it was a rather cowardly way of keeping his head attached to his body.

Whatever we may think of it, God did work with Abram, despite his flaws and despite his fears, and the promise of a son was fulfilled. Again and again, throughout Old Testament and New, God takes some very unlikely candidates, deals with their fears, and turns them into great leaders. It seems to be the divine stock-in-trade.

Which is why, I suppose, when I first saw *The King's Speech* I immediately felt a spiritual resonance.

The Hollywood machine spends billions of dollars turning out scary movies, creating better and better special effects in the hope of eliciting that vicarious thrill that is so successful in putting certain sorts of bums on seats. Yet if there has ever been a greater cinematic portrayal of fear than the opening sequence of *The King's Speech*, I can't recall it. It is the stuff of nightmares – suddenly finding yourself completely tongue-tied and unprepared, called upon to speak in front of millions of people.

My husband can certainly identify with this. He spent most of his career in BBC radio, beginning as a sound operator for the World Service. On nightshifts, as a nervous 19-year-old trainee, part of his duty was to do the service announcements between programmes. Throughout his life, if he has a nightmare, it is always of the red light suddenly coming on and not knowing what to say.

I too can identify: I was so shy that it took me until I was 40 years old to have the courage to express my views in a large group or a classroom situation, let alone stand up and speak before an audience. I can do it now, though I'm not sure what triggered the change. Interesting though, that it was about that time that I wrote the little fable reproduced on p. 41: *The prince*

who forgot who he was. Maybe that was part of me working it through.

And maybe that is why, as I have put together this course, I have kept returning to a certain sentence in the New Testament, from one of the apostle Peter's letters:

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.
(1 Peter 2: 9)

I know that this idea of a chosen people, with its racist connotations and accompanying doctrine of predestination, can cause more problems than it solves, creating dangerous and divisive ideas of elitism and favouritism.

That is not how I understand it. Rather I would say that God picks up on even the smallest longing in the human heart: to be better, to be loving, to be moral, and says 'Ah, now that's someone I can work with'. In fact, this is one of Christianity's many paradoxes: if you think you've made it, you haven't; if you think you're at the top of the heap, you aren't. If you are not afraid in one way or another, if you are not aware of your own flaws and weaknesses, then perhaps you are not malleable enough to be used.

But ultimately fear needs to be dealt with. It will always entrap us and hold us back unless it is managed. Philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev said that:

Victory over fear is the first spiritual duty of man.¹

For Berdyaev, writing in Russia in the early twentieth century, such a victory came at a cost. Berdyaev believed in both radical socialism and Christianity, but could not accept the oppressive power of either the Orthodox Church or the Bolsheviks. For him, fulfilling his spiritual duty and speaking out led to 26 years in exile.

The King's Speech too demonstrates how costly this victory

can be. It demands courage, perseverance and the will to succeed. But as the film shows, what really makes the difference is not going it alone. It is often said that the opposite of love is fear, and it seems it works both ways. 'Perfect love drives out fear', says the apostle John.² The Christian writer John Gunstone expands on it thus:

The best answer to fear is to have a firm grasp of what it means to be accepted by God.³

So as you begin this Lenten study, take to yourself God's oft-repeated command, 'Do not be afraid.' Because it comes with a promise:

'I am your shield.'

*Lord of my Lenten journey,
Who calls me, flawed and fearful as I am,
I acknowledge before you now my mixed feelings:
 wanting to be loving one minute
 not being bothered the next;
 wanting to move forward one day,
 wanting to be undisturbed the next.
I bring before you now the fears, acknowledged and
unrecognised, that hold me back.
I invite your love to do its work.
Take me as I am. Do with me as you will.
Amen.*