

Hebrews 4:12-16

St Mary's Enville & St Peter's Kinver
Rev'd Rich Clarkson, 13th October 2024

When I was a young child we lived in Trowbridge in Wiltshire, and I went to Margaret Stancombe Infants School. Margaret Stancombe Infants School was a lovely school which had a gigantic tree right in the middle of the field, and I had a teacher called Miss Ginetta who rode to school every day on a moped. I don't remember a lot from Infants school, but those memories that I do have are very happy ones! However, infant school days can't last forever, and after Margaret Stancombe Infant School came Parochial Junior School. Parochial Junior School was a very big school with lots of noisy children, and gigantic iron gates that you had to walk through every morning.

My sister was the year above me and so she moved from the Infants School to the Junior School a year before I did. And during that year I heard lots of the kind of scary stories that big sisters like to tell their little brothers about life at the big school. And in these stories there was one figure in particular who loomed large – the head teacher, Mr Janman. According to my sister Mr Janman was very scary indeed. You did not want to get called into his office, or be spotted by him when you were doing anything at all out of line. Fuelled by Helen's stories, in my imagination Mr Janman became very much the same as Miss Trunchbull in Roald Dahl's book Matilda. So when the time came for me to follow in my sister's footsteps and make the move from Margaret Stancombe Infants School to Parochial Junior School I have to admit I was scared.

I still remember the first day when we filed into the dining room at lunchtime. Jostled by one of the big children I nearly dropped my tray as I was getting my lunch but thankfully one of the teachers caught it and handed it back to me with a kindly smile, before going and sitting down at the piano and playing some gentle music while we ate. You can imagine my surprise when, in the assembly at the end of the day, that kind, gentle, musical teacher turned out to be none other than Mr Janman himself! He was nothing like the ogre he'd turned into in my imagination – and I quickly learned not to trust anything my sister said to me after that! I was only at Parochial Junior School for one term, because we soon moved to Shrewsbury, but I have very fond memories of that kind head teacher who was always willing to help whenever I needed it.

Looking back there were two very different versions of Mr Janman. One was the scary head teacher made by a combination of my sister's stories and my overactive imagination. The other was the kind and caring head teacher of reality. And I do wonder whether for many people, for many of us here even, God is a bit like that.

For many people, perhaps fuelled by stories they have heard, or by handed down memories of strict Victorian disciplinarians, God is distant and scary. God may be benevolent, even even, but is certainly not to be approached without the appropriate levels of fear and trembling – like a scary head teacher! But as many of us here have discovered, the reality is that God is not like that at all. God is kind, gentle, patient, caring. And that's the message that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews which we heard earlier is trying to get across.

“We do not have a high priest” they write, “who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”

In other words Jesus knows what it's like to be human, and because Jesus is God that means that God knows what it's like to be human. And so when we come to God with our cares and concerns, our worries and our struggles, we are coming to a God who knows what that's like.

“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses” And they go on - *“Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*

“Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness.” Every time I hear that verse I’m reminded of the famous photo of US President John F Kennedy sat at the Resolute Desk in the White House, a classic picture of the leader of the free world – except in this particular photo there’s a playful smile on his face as his 2 year old son is hiding underneath the desk beneath him. Never mind all the important people who come and go from the Oval Office, all the difficult and world changing decisions that are made by the President, for him it’s just his dad. That’s what God wants us to be like, like a child curling up on their parents’ lap, playing at their feet. *“Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness”*

This week in the Pilgrim Course we spent some time talking about the beginning of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, in which Paul goes to great lengths to remind them – and us – that we are God’s children because God really really wants us to be! *“He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Jesus we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.”*

That is over the top language – the riches of his grace, freely bestowed, lavished on us! God isn’t just doing the bare minimum for us, God is going over the top in making sure that we know that we are loved, that we know that we are accepted, that we know that we are God’s children. And yet, despite all that, we so often still let those puritanical victorian disciplinarian head teacherly ideas of a God who is scary or angry stop us from curling up in the lap of our heavenly Father who loves us unconditionally.

“Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness.” What is holding you back today? What experiences, anxieties, images, life choices, get in the way for you? Stop you from approaching the throne of Grace with boldness?

Maybe you’re like the rich young man in our Gospel reading, unable to let go of earthly wealth, earthly power, in exchange for the abundance of heavenly blessings that Jesus offers.

Maybe you’re afraid, because you’ve been hurt before by parental figures who have failed to love unconditionally and it’s hard to trust that God won’t be more of the same.

Maybe it’s just hard to find the time in amongst the busyness and the emails and the lists and the ever-present demands of daily existence.

Maybe you’re just not quite ready to make that leap yet. Or maybe it’s something else altogether.

Whatever it may be that’s holding you back – and we all have things, I know I do – let us all, today, approach the throne of grace with boldness. Let us all, today, come into God’s presence trusting, knowing, believing, that God loves us unconditionally – with all our faults and failings, with all our worries and weaknesses. Let us come into God’s presence with boldness, and receive the riches of his grace, freely bestowed, lavished upon us, God’s beloved children.

Amen.