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Fight or flight?

In the early twentieth century American physiologist Walter Bradford Cannon coined the phrase 'fight or flight' to describe how animals respond to threats. Some turn and run (flight), others stand and attack (fight). While not as simple as a binary choice, we see similar responses in humans. When faced with a threat, some turn away from it, others turn to it. However, there is something that happens to most of us prior to the choice to fight or flee. We fear. We are afraid. In fact all of us experience fear in some form in our lives. We may be afraid of loneliness or poverty or death. Others fear the disapproval of others or the uncertainty of change. That we fear is common to us all. How we respond to fear, however, is significantly different for God's people.

The apostle John in writing to his 'dear children' gives us the antidote to fear - the Christian response - 'perfect love drives out fear' (1 John 4:18). Love is the Christian's response to fear. Firstly love of God, which shows itself in love of others (firstly Christians, then the world). John's argument is that perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. And love is perfected in us as we trust in the God who has borne our guilt and before whom we stand innocent, and as God transforms us to be like Jesus both in love for him and others. Are you afraid? The antidote is love. God's love of you in Christ, and your response of love to him and to his people and his world.

As Evangelical Anglicans the next 18 months or so carry many reasons to be fearful. Our General Synod appears intent on finding a way to bless same-gendered relationships, and while we await the findings of the Way Forward Working Group to hear both if, and how, this will be promoted, should such blessings be permitted it would constitute a change in our church beyond anything we have seen before. Some are fearful that the church they have loved and served all their lives is changing too far. Others are fearful that they might be required to act in ways that are contrary to their consciences. Others are fearful that to stand against these moves will bring with it a cost too great to bear. In such a situation what might it look like for us to have our fear driven out by perfect love?

The answer, of course, is in the question. While we might initially respond to such news with fear, our measured thoughts and actions will always be driven by love. Our response to what General Synod might do will not be motivated by being 'anti'

anyone; we will not act simply because the majority do; nor will we go along with the crowd - be it the Latimer Fellowship or any other group. Our response will not follow the path of least resistance, nor will we look for a future in which we might build our empires or promote ourselves. We are a church under the authority of the one who formed us through the death of his Son. And our Lord told us that those who love him will obey his commands (John 14:15). So we will think, pray and respond as led by the Scriptures, always seeking to love God by obeying his word, and loving others by holding out to them that very same saving word.

It means that we will not be afraid to stay. We will not be afraid to hold firmly to God's word even when it feels like we are the only ones in our small group, our parish, or our diocese. We will remember that we are driven by a love of God and therefore have no choice but to hold to the clear teaching of Scripture. And that we are driven by a love of others and therefore will do all we can to ensure that sin is not redefined nor the need for repentance removed, so that the glorious hope of forgiveness might not be stolen from people. Therefore we will take opportunities to speak - in our small groups, to our vestries, at synods. We will write to Bishops and committees urging them to do all they can to ensure the church holds to the gospel entrusted to us.

However, there may come a time when our love of God and others requires us to explore new structures which will enable us to remain faithful to the gospel and our Anglican heritage. At such a time we will not be afraid to leave, for should this happen we will not really be leaving. We will be remaining faithfully Anglican, but such a move will come with a cost as we leave pensions and parish buildings. Overseas experience tells us that such a decision will be costly in all sorts of ways. But we will not be afraid for we will be driven by love. We will trust that God will love his people who seek to love him by obeying his word, just as he has done throughout time. We will trust that he who loves this world far more than we do will continue to spread his gospel and bring people to know his love through it. For overseas experience (as well as the story of West Hamilton Anglican Parish) also tells us that as God's people have met fear with love, God has honoured them, growing his kingdom prolifically through them, and transforming them more and more into the likeness of Jesus.