

What are you afraid of?

Ephesians 4:17-24, 30-5:2

This has been the winter of my discontent. Australia's national rugby union team, the Wallabies, lost to the visiting British and Irish Lions team. My AFL team, the Adelaide Crows, have lost more than they've won this year. Cadel Evans has had a difficult Tour De France, and won't repeat his heroics of 2011. The Australian Cricket Team is trying hard, but haven't been quite good enough, losing the First Test, and the Second Test is in the balance.



So perhaps I've been a little grumpy in the last few weeks. Late nights in front of the TV

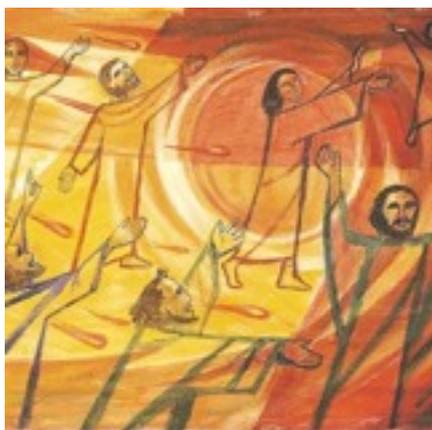
watching the Ashes and the Tour De France haven't helped. But it's not just sleep deprivation. There's a sense of melancholy about a string of defeats. I'm losing my confidence in Australian sport. We no longer stride the world sporting stage like a Colossus. I have to steel myself when I wake up every morning for the overnight news. I go to bed a little more disheartened. Grumpy perhaps, but not grieving.



Sport may both inspire and discourage us in equal measure, but in the end, as my father used to remind me endlessly, and perhaps because of my capacity to take losing a little bit too personally, it's only a game. And because it's a game, the feelings it evokes are not at the core of my being. I get over a lost test match pretty quickly. But getting over the breaking down of a relationship, or the death of a loved one is in a different league all together. Grief is the word that we rightly use in a situation like that. We've been wounded right in the core of our being. Things are not going to be the same again. Life isn't just going to roll on as if nothing happened.

What is true in our lives is also true in the life of the Triune God, and in the way that God has taken us into his life and love. Hear what Paul says: "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." We can only speak about grief in the context of a deep and valued relationship. Paul's words give us an insight into the depth of God's relationship with us, how much God treasures relationship with us and how he wants this relationship to so govern our lives that we don't just share in God's life but exhibit the character of God.





In Romans 8 Paul speaks about the deep work of healing and rehabilitation that God's Holy Spirit performs in us. "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again, rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption." Our adoption into God's family have been signed, sealed and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This isn't a legal process, a piece of paper, in this case a baptism certificate. Instead, it's a change in the heart that is engineered by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit takes up residence within, "the Spirit himself testifying with our spirit that we are God's children...heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ."

There's not meant to be any fear in this. God's "perfect love casts out fear." There should certainly be awe, and amazement, and gratitude beyond words for the fact that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, but not anxious fear about God and his love for us. What does it mean to you that God is closer to you than your next heartbeat, your next breath?

So why might we still be afraid of the Holy Spirit? What might the Spirit do that we might object to? Does God's Holy Spirit ride roughshod over our personality, our gifts, and our talents? Does the Holy Spirit want to turn us into identical cardboard cut-outs?

Eugene Peterson writes with great wisdom: "What we must realise is that the Holy Spirit is above all courteous. There is no coercion, no manipulation, no forcing. The Holy Spirit treats us with dignity, respects our freedom."

The Holy Spirit is God's empowering presence, and what he empowers in us is a life of blessing and salvation, a life of resurrection. It is most definitely not a life of self-will, a life of self-righteousness, a life of using God to get what we want."

Self-will and self-righteousness are the root cause of behaviours that "grieve the Holy Spirit of God." They comfort from the sin within, the sin that sticks like chewing gum to carpet, the selfish impulses about which we need to be constantly vigilant. Paul begins this section of Ephesians 4 by warning us: "You must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking..."

As *The Message* puts it: "Don't go along with the crowd...They've refused for so long to deal with God that they've lost touch not only with God but with reality itself...Feeling no pain, they let themselves go in sexual obsession, addicted to every sort of perversion." This kind of thinking translated into action puts self, rather than God, front and centre. God is not glorified in this behaviour, nor, I would argue, are we. We cheapen and pollute ourselves when we head down this path. We see this so clearly in a culture which glorifies these very things. And in habitual behaviours that he points to that are designed to build us up at the expense of others: "falsehood... anger... unwholesome talk...bitterness, rage...brawling, slander, along with every form of malice." These behaviours trash our new identity, and mean that we don't live as God has recreated us to be "like him in true righteousness and holiness."



God isn't indifferent to this. God doesn't shrug his shoulders and exit the scene. He hurts. We grieve the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. We break the Father heart of God whose grace has flowed into our lives through the life of his Son Jesus, spent for us on the cross. We debase Jesus'

sacrifice when we live as if it hadn't happened, or if it didn't matter. Where to from here? Should we be afraid, very afraid?

Even here, the Holy Spirit works to bring beauty out of ugly things. His grief doesn't transform into anger, but into renewed grace. That's why Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the Jesus says that one of the tasks of the Holy Spirit is to "convict the world of sin." This the Spirit also does in our lives. The Holy Spirit searches our heart and mind, and leads us to repentance so that we can once again live into the fullness of what it means to be children of God.



True, this can be a painful process, as we come to realise the grief our disobedience has caused to the Holy Spirit, and the hurt our actions have caused to others. But there is nothing to be afraid of, because the Holy Spirit wants only for us what God the Father wants; that "we walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us, and gave himself up to us a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." There the Holy Spirit goes again, using the word of God to point us to Jesus and his sacrificial death and resurrection.

So what do we have to be afraid of? Most certainly not the Holy Spirit, who is on our side, who intercedes for us before our Father, whose constant presence in our lives is the guarantee of God's love for us. Our fears are so often based on what others think about us, about how

steering a godly course will bring opposition and antagonism. It's then that we do face a clear choice: succumbing to fear or choosing the way of the perfect love that casts our fear. The choice is ours, many times over each day.

As you face these discipleship decisions, remember this: the Holy Spirit lives in you, and "the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline." Then go and live as a child of God. Amen.

