

child is already so weak she can barely walk.

Or bring it closer to home. We all have our fears too, most of us feel a bit more vulnerable nowadays than we used to, the threat of terrorism makes itself felt in the back of many of our minds whether we acknowledge it or not. Then there's loss, one of the deepest of our fears, we all fear losing people or relationships or belongings or abilities.

Then there are those forces inside us, our own sin and stupidity which can feel awfully powerful sometimes and which threaten to overwhelm us from the inside, our greatest fears come from inside ourselves.

There's certainly plenty around in the world to frighten us, and so it's very important that we should be able to find that fear reflected when we look in the Bible. When we read there of people being frightened we know straight away what it was like for them, and by the same token we can see that the people of the Bible understand us too. The Bible is not an escapist book which seeks to cover over our fears with a veneer of jollity. It's a serious story which engages with the real difficulties of human life. It takes our fears seriously and holds up a mirror to them to enable us to face them.

Now it seems to me that discovering our fears reflected in the Bible story can do two things for us.

First of all it shows that our fears are acknowledged by God. It shows us that he understands and that some of the greatest heroes of our faith knew fear. Fear is not something we need to feel guilty about but it is a legitimate part of our human psyche. The Christmas stories show us that fear doesn't separate us from God but rather that God is with us in our fear and still calling us to serve him. That's what

happened with Zechariah, with Mary and with the shepherds.

There's another step though, because that fear can never be the whole story. Yes God is affirming our true feelings and caring for us when they threaten us; yes he's encouraging us to acknowledge them ourselves even when it's scary, but in the end fear is not what he wants for us. He wants to move us on from that so that we can love and trust him.

You see, however natural fear is, it's actually quite disabling. Fear can turn us in on ourselves and stop us loving; it can stop us from seeing where God is present with us and it can prevent us from responding wholeheartedly and generously to God and to those in need around us. God understands our fear but he wants to lift it from us and free us from it.

Listen now to the words of the angels to those frightened people in the Christmas story.

The first words of the angel who appeared to Zechariah were "Do not be afraid, your prayer has been heard." The first words of the angel Gabriel who appeared to Mary after his initial greeting were "Do not be afraid Mary, for God has been gracious to you." The first words of the Angel to the shepherds were "Do not be afraid I bring you good news."

Do not be afraid, your prayer has been heard, God has been gracious to you, I bring you good news.

That's the second message then. Do not be afraid. God doesn't want us to fear, he doesn't want us to be frightened of him and he doesn't want us to be frightened of each other. He wants to lift fear from us and release us from the disabling effects of it so that we can respond with the love that he gives us and which he calls us to give