

RUMBLINGS FROM THE BUNKER

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I first met him when I was very young. I did not know then that he was such a spoilsport and I certainly did not know he was such a robber. As I grew up I began to realise that he was very strong, very powerful. Whilst I do not believe in giving into regret and the pointlessness of 'what if', I do still marvel at the influence I allowed him to have on my life. I think it's true to say I did not suffer much from allowing him to decide what I would do but certainly there was more than a few occasions when he managed to stop me doing something that I might like to have done. For a good while I was fooled by his masks and many disguises. At times he wore the 'mask of common sense' whilst on other occasions arriving wrapped in 'the cloak of doing the right thing'. I used to wonder had others met him, and to my surprise I discovered he is very well known indeed. The truth of the matter is he manages to live with people a long time before they cop on to him. Indeed even then, often having caused a lot of harm, he is still very hard to get rid of.

It has become very trendy to say that the phrase 'Do not be afraid' appears three hundred and sixty five times in the Bible, one for everyday in the year. Having said that I heard somebody argue the other day that it's only thirty seven times. Today I explored this a bit myself and there seems to be a consensus that's it's one hundred and forty five times. Whatever about the rights and wrongs of this debate what can be stated with authority is that the theme of 'Be not afraid' is very prevalent throughout Sacred Scripture. The beautiful images of the Good Shepherd in Psalm twenty-three, in all its tenderness and reassurance, are further deepened by the words and actions of Jesus in the Gospels. It is very clear that Jesus does not want us to be afraid. In fact he does not want us bound, unfree shut down or up! He wants our freedom, which we should not confuse with doing our own thing, he wants us to embrace true freedom not its inferior and disappointing relative, licence.

I am not sure I qualify for the term 'frequent flyer' but most years I make the trip to the United States. My couple of weeks there whilst something of a bus man's holiday is also a lovely break and I come back batteries recharged rearing to go. I do not make money there but more importantly it costs me nothing. Now a few years ago out of the blue I was seized with real panic about flying. It came on me just a few weeks before our planned trip. The fear was very specific, the plane I was on was hijacked. The more I tried to shake this notion off the more it seemed to take root. Soon it was my first thought in the morning and the last at night. Before long I was having nightmares. I tried to figure ways I could tell my travelling companion and good friend, Fr. John. How could I do this without letting him down? We arranged to meet for lunch in a pub restaurant in Leixlip and I explained that the fear had got such a grip of me that I would cause a scene in the airport or worse still on the plane. Gradually through the power of prayer and the gift of friendship it dawned on me that if I did not fly this time then it was very possible that I may well never fly again. I was forty-four and I was never going to fly again? How restrictive and limiting that would be. Look at all the wonderful possibilities I was going to say no to. Another thing that dawned on me was: I am saying no to flying, how long before I am saying, 'that M50 has got very dangerous'? What would be next? The stairs are dangerous, you could have a bad fall, time to bring the bed down? Don't get me wrong there can be a time for this, a time when to continue going up stairs is foolhardy, and the bed downstairs prudent and wise. However what is key here, is timing. The choice between valiantly hanging on to ones own independence and graciously and gently accepting the vicissitudes of growing old is never going to be easy. What we must remember is to try to recognise fear, look him in the eye and say no, at least not yet, my terms, not yours, release my arm, I choose freedom. As we get older it can be hard to resist fear. Sometimes we do not even recognise it as fear. One of the greatest ways of weakening fear is to name it, at first to yourself. One of my favourite lines from the gospel is Jn 16: 33. It gives me great comfort.

'I have told you all this so that you may find peace in me. In the world you will have trouble but be brave: I have conquered the world.'

