

## Am I Being Paranoid?

The feeling that everyone's out to get you is not always pathological. Like most delusions, it rests on a basis of truth, though often it's truth distorted into fearsome shapes by our faulty perceptions. We don't need mad delusions to terrify us: we're already terrified of the truth, despite the fact that the truth is always of God, and therefore radiant with eternal joy. Indeed, maybe it's God who really rattles us, and we try to evade truth because it leads us to face him. If this is real, then those who make a point of having no religion may be giving in to fear; and those of us who admit to being religious ought to be ready to live with terror.

### Jeremiah

Prophets are aware of the terror of God. They can't evade it, though Jeremiah sometimes looked enviously on the people around him who never felt it. He admits that once he tried to forget God and get on with a simple earthly life like his neighbours. He found it was like pretending not to notice that you're having a heart-attack; he couldn't do it. So he continued to act as God's mouthpiece, begging all the while to be released from the agony of having to disagree, attack, condemn, and give oracles of doom to other people. No wonder that he felt paranoid; he could feel the fear and hatred of his own people, the loneliness of being the confidant of God when no-one else seemed to be. In the first reading today he even asks God to turn the tables on his enemies, to vindicate His prophet in their sight. The phrase "I have committed my cause to you" reminds us of the Psalm the dying Jesus says in Luke, "Into your hands I commend my spirit". Indeed, Jeremiah feels that his prophecies have brought him to the threshold between life and death. It is a fearful place for anyone to be - but not a bad one.

### Life Hangs By A Thread

We like to pretend that we are "sound, substantial flesh and blood"; but indeed we are intensely vulnerable - precisely because we are flesh and blood. We are so totally flesh and blood that, if they malfunction, be our spirit never so strong, we perish. So all our Protean flights of spiritual power have to keep faith with the world of flesh and blood, as Jesus did when he hung on the Cross for us. Much of our fear, and our fear of fear, is because of the terrible fact that our life cannot escape from its vulnerability, so that our moments of self-possession and self-sufficiency, instead of being the times when we are most effectively ourselves, are the times when we are

most out of touch with the truth, so most at risk. Behind the competent smile of the successful man who knows his powers and limitations, and likes what he sees, there lurks a stranger who is sure that the whole charade may at any moment come unstuck, and crash to the ground about his ears. (Or am I being paranoid?)

### "There Is No Need To Be Afraid!"

Our tendency to tell people not to be afraid does little good once they have let themselves glimpse their vulnerability. Any of us would be afraid, once we had realised that we were in peril! On the other hand, to give us a reason not be afraid is something else: and this is what Jesus does. The reason why we should not be afraid is in the love of God for us; and that is something beyond our measuring (every hair on our head is counted). But this message is still given to us in the context of opposition, of contradiction. The whole passage is exhorting us not to be afraid, and Jesus is speaking like an officer encouraging his men before they go out to fight. What are we fighting against, and what for? If I'm right, we fight against our own fear of God, of his love and of his possible absence. We soon learn that God's love is not that of an indulgent human father. The One Jesus addresses as "Abba" is the one who called him to the Cross. There is plenty to dismay us in love like that. We learn to fear the demands of it; and against that fear we must hurl our human power, which will always be reinforced by God's grace, to trust Him with all our might. It is this integrated self, held together by trust in God, which will change us into the human beings we are designed, and promised, to become. Isn't this more dramatic, more promising, and more challenging than the desperately limited outlook that's plagued us for three hundred years, of trying to make a mighty fortress out of self, through indulgence, possessiveness, and the manipulation of earthly powers? Where is Napoleon, where are Hitler and Stalin, these heroes of self-determination? If trust in God may sometimes seem the utmost loneliness, may it not be the way to life?

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