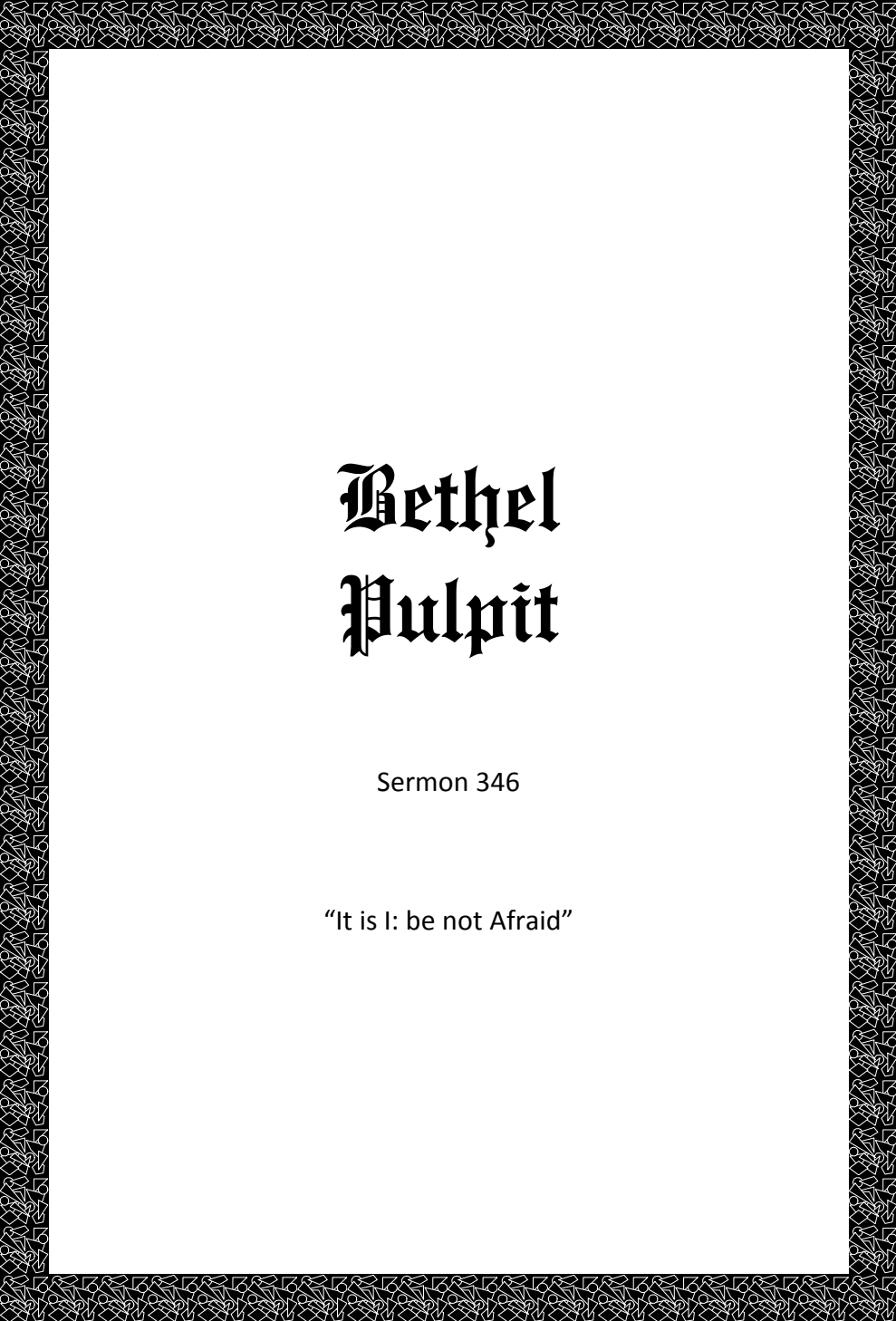




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 346

“It is I: be not Afraid”

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Thursday, 6th March, 2014**

Text: *“But He saith unto them, It is I; be not afraid” (John 6. 20).*

The life of a believer is compared to a spiritual voyage. There is an embarking; there must be an embarking. We must “leave the world’s deceitful shore, and leave it to return no more.” We shall never reach heaven unless we sail heavenwards. And then there is that trackless sea, and there will be the storms, but we have a Pilot, and we have a compass, the Word of God, and we have an anchor. And then there is the promise: “So He bringeth them unto their desired haven.”

Now what a beautiful figure we have of all this in the life and witness and experience of the people of God in this remarkable account of the Lord Jesus walking on the sea and the amazing miracle that He performed for them. We read that He *constrained* them to get into the ship. In real religion, there is this constraint. The apostle speaks of it like this: “The love of Christ constraineth us.” It is the powerful work of the Lord by His Spirit to bring us to rise up and leave the world and set out on this heavenly voyage. Now He constrained them. It is God’s work in the beginning. With some it is more powerful; with some it is more gentle; with some it is sudden; some can give a place; some can give a clear word. But it is this: “Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power.” So there is this constraining. It is really that word: “Rise up, My love, My fair one, and come away.” There is a coming away from the world, and from your past life, and from former companions, and from vain hopes, and from confidence in yourself, and your own self-righteousness, and it is a coming away after the Saviour in hope, seeking to know Him, to follow Him, to go after Him “with heaven your journey’s end in view.”

So He constrained them. But very soon there was a storm. Now do not be surprised if the Lord deals with you savingly and graciously and you are enabled to take up your cross, to follow Him – do not be surprised if there is a storm, and not only just when you first set out in the things of God. If you are constrained by the love of Christ openly to profess the Lord’s name, do not be surprised if soon afterwards you come into the storm. Or again there are times when some of the Lord’s people are constrained to walk in a special pathway, a new way. “Ye have not passed

this way heretofore.” And they feel sure it is right. “This is the way, walk ye in it.” And then there is the storm. And of course Satan’s suggestion is that you must have been wrong altogether; if the Lord had constrained you, there would not have been the storm.

“And the sea arose by reason of a great wind that blew.” Now the point with these disciples was that the Lord Jesus was not with them. He constrained them to get into the ship, but He was not with them. He Himself, we are told, went up to the top of the mountain to pray. “And it was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them.” That was the trial. He could see them. They could not see Him, and they did not know He was watching them, and they did not know He was watching over them, and they could not believe He could see them, because literally it was dark, and they were out at sea, and He was on the top of the mountain. But we are told that “He saw them toiling in rowing; for the wind was contrary unto them.”

I am sure many of you know these contrary winds – things that are against you, things that trouble you, things that come in your life – the contrary winds and the storm and the waves. We have it spiritually, our concerns: Am I right or am I not? What about eternity? or what about when I come to die? What about my sin? What about my unbelief? What about my hard heart? What about my wilderness condition? You see the storms and the winds and the darkness. And then there is sadness, bereavement, the loss of loved ones, and the winds blow and the storm beats on you. Sometimes it is dark. And then there are those of you who are unwell, or who are concerned about those who are unwell, and it is the storm, and it is the darkness. And then there are those in trouble, trouble of various kinds, and what is a trouble to one is not a trouble to another. And then there are the things you have before you. There is the unknown way, perhaps the things you shrink from, perhaps the things that you fear.

So there is this heavenly voyage and these storms. “The sea arose by reason of a great wind that blew.” “And it was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them.” That is the trial of the people of God, when it is dark and the Lord Jesus is not come. Some of you have been dark in your spirit, seeking the Lord, and it is still dark, and He has not come. And some of you are praying for Him to help you, and it is still dark, and He has not come. And Satan takes advantage of these things. “It was now dark, and

Jesus was not come to them.” Perhaps you are sad and He has not come to comfort you, and perhaps your prayer is, “When wilt Thou come unto Me?” Or perhaps your prayer is, “Remember me, O Lord with the favour that Thou bearest unto Thy people: O visit me with Thy salvation.”

But it is now dark and Jesus has not come. You cannot see Him. When it is dark you cannot see Him. But He hides His face from you and you would see Jesus. “It was now dark, and Jesus was not come.” But He did come. He had promised to come and He did not come too late, and you will prove this: it is now dark, and Jesus had not come. “He tarries oft till men are faint, and comes at evening late.” But His coming is as sure as the dawn. His coming is prepared as the morning.

But it was impossible that He could come. You think of it naturally. They knew He was on the shore. Whether they knew He was up in the mountain or not, we are not told, but they knew He was not with them. But they were a few miles out at sea and it was a raging storm, a raging ocean. If you read the account of travellers to the East, they give some frightening descriptions of storms on the Sea of Galilee. Those of you who have that famous Victorian book, Dr. Thomson’s *The Land and the Book* (which so often is quoted), he gives an amazing description of witnessing a storm on the Sea of Galilee. It was impossible that the Lord Jesus could ever come to them.

“It was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them.” So what did they do? Turn round and sail back to the shore with the wind behind their back? Now you will never be permitted to do that. They may have been tempted, but they were toiling and rowing. What is it?

“I’ve wrestled on towards heaven,
’Gainst storm, and wind, and tide.”

They may have been blown out of their course; they may have been blown back a bit; but they did not turn round and row their way back, or sail back with the wind behind them to the shore they had left. Though you are tempted, you will never be allowed to do that. “I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

But, “It was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them.” Now He saw them. They could not see Him, and they did not know that He could see them. Our hymnwriter puts it very beautifully:

“He sees us when we see not Him,
And always hears our cry.”

There are those times when you cannot really see the Lord, but His loving, watching eye is upon you. “The eye of the Lord is upon them that fear Him,” and it is an eye that is never closed, and it is an eye that never slumbers, never sleeps. It is a loving eye; it is a watchful eye; it is a caring eye. “The eye of the Lord is upon them that fear Him,” and, “His ears are open unto their cry.” That is why they could not perish in the storm. That was what they feared, that they were never going to get safely through. You may be like that sometimes concerning your whole spiritual pilgrimage at last, or it may be just the thing you are in at present. How can you carry on? How can you manage? How can you continue? How can you get through? This loving, watchful eye of the Saviour is an almighty eye.

“And it was now dark, and Jesus was not come to them.” But He waits to be gracious, and He is not in a hurry, but He has never yet been late and He never will. That is a lovely word we sing:

“..... *when I come there,*
I can’t be confounded, The Lord will appear.”

Not the day before –

“..... *when I come there,*
I can’t be confounded, The Lord will appear.”

So, “He saw them toiling and rowing,” and they were not making any headway, because it was the third watch of the night, which must have been about three o’clock in the morning, and they had hardly got halfway across the lake. But He saw them, and He loved them, and they could not perish, and He was going to bring them through. That is what it is with you tonight, even if you cannot see Him, you cannot trace His goings, you cannot discern His purpose. He is caring for you. He is going to bring you along and bring you through. It is impossible you should perish. You cannot sink.

“He saw them,” but there was no way He could come to them. It was absolutely, utterly, completely impossible, but He made that stormy sea a carpet on which He quietly and silently walked right where they were. He does “plant His footsteps in the sea, and ride upon the storm,” as

He purposes that mysterious way for you, though it is not mysterious to Him. But He came right where they were and He did everything for them and He brought them safely to land.

The Lord Jesus walking on the sea – it was one of His greatest miracles. Do not forget, it is the same Jesus, “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.” But it was the third watch of the night, that was about three o’clock in the morning, and they say that is the darkest hour. So He did not come till the darkest hour, but He did come and He was not too late, and it was when they had waited long and when they had toiled long, and perhaps when they had been disappointed long. “When will my Saviour come?” Because, “it was now dark, and Jesus was not come,” but He did come and He came in time and He did everything that was needed.

Really it is something like that now – the church of God like a little boat here below, tempest-tossed, the individual believer the same, and where is the Lord Jesus? Well, He had gone up to the top of the mountain, and we are told, to pray for them. That is it: you on earth and a risen, exalted Saviour, a glorious High Priest, He has gone up to the top of the mountain; He is in heaven. His eye is on you, and what is it?

“For His people He is pleading;
There He does their place prepare;
Ever for them interceding,
Till in glory they appear.”

And we are told, “They were afraid.” I think it is Bishop Ryle makes this comment, that if you read all through Scripture, the one passion which seems to have troubled God’s people more than any other from Genesis to Revelation is being afraid. And if you read it carefully, so it is, God’s people so often being afraid. I mean afraid of Satan, afraid of sin, afraid of death, afraid of hell, afraid of people, afraid of trouble – so you might go on. Bishop Ryle says that is why the Lord so often says, “Be not afraid,” or He says, “Fear not.”

“They were afraid. But He saith unto them, It is I; be not afraid.” He came right where they were, and whether they could not see Him properly, or who He was, He said, “It is I.” They knew His voice. “It is I.” There was comfort in it. He spoke to them; He stilled their fears. I am

sure there are many of you here in this chapel tonight and nothing would give you greater delight than if the dear Saviour were to come to you and lovingly, graciously, kindly say, “Sinner, it is I.”

I do not want to give you a long catalogue now, but, “It is I” – your Saviour. “It is I” – your Friend. “It is I” – who has loved you with an everlasting love. “It is I” – who will help you. “It is I” – who will never leave thee nor forsake thee. “It is I” – who died for you on the cross. “It is I” – who now in heaven lives for you. “It is I” – the Shepherd of His people who lovingly, kindly cares for them, for the sheep and for the lambs, who will never let them perish, who holds them in His arms. “It is I” – the great and glorious High Priest, having atoned for sin, now for ever interceding. “It is I” – an almighty Saviour, able to save you to the uttermost, despite all your sin and all your guilt, and though it may be dark, and though it may be a storm. “It is I.” “Why those fears? behold, ’tis Jesus.” “It is I” – who will help you. “It is I” – who will answer your prayers. “It is I” – who will bring you safely through. O that we might be blessed with a little faith this evening to see this. The Lord Jesus says, “Behold Me; it is I.”

“They were afraid. But He saith unto them, It is I; be not afraid.” There are many things to make a child of God afraid. What about his sins? “Be not afraid.” “Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine.” Your weakness and helplessness and need. “It is I; be not afraid.” “Fear not: for I *am* with thee” – the sweet assurance of His gracious presence. “Be not afraid.” Why? “For I am thy God.” What more can you need? “I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of My righteousness.”

“It is I; be not afraid.” But O the mystery of providence and all the peculiar things in your life and all the entanglements! He says, “Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore.” “It is I; be not afraid.” “Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows.” But at times you go to an open grave and then leave that open grave, and then you think of yourself and when you must come there. He who is the resurrection and the life says, “It is I; be not afraid.” O how He laid His hand on the head of John and said, “Fear not; I

am the first and the last: I am He that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.”

“It is I; be not afraid.” This is what we long for tonight and pray for personally, that when we come into a time of trouble, and if the storm beats high, and if you are afraid, for the Lord Jesus in love to come right where you are and say, “It is I; be not afraid.” And as we think of the certainty of death – “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” – but when you and I come there, if only the dear Saviour stands with us and He says, “It is I; be not afraid.” That “will Jordan’s icy waves divide, and land your soul with God.”

And what about when you meet your Maker and stand before the judgment seat of Christ? We have sung that hymn once or twice recently and it is very, very beautiful. If people sometimes say, How are you going to manage when you stand at the judgment seat of Christ?

“If Jesus did Himself withdraw,
I know Thy holy, fiery law
My soul to hell would send.”

What a mercy if in that great day we see the Lord Jesus whom we trust we have known and loved, and if He stands with us and says, “It is I.” And your Judge is your Saviour; your Judge is your Friend.”

“A sinner self-condemned I come,
Worthy that Thou should’st me consume,
But, O! one thing I plead:
The every mite to Thee I owed,
Christ Jesus, with His own heart’s blood,
In pity for me paid.”

Now this is it:

“Now should’st Thou me to judgment call,
Though Moses faced me there, and all
My dreadful sins appeared,
I should not fear” –

Now this is our prayer, perhaps not the sweet assurance of it, but our hope: “I should not fear, but boldly stand.” It is the Lord Jesus saying, “It is I; be not afraid.”

“I should not fear, but boldly stand;
Through Jesus’ pierced heart and hand,
I know I should be spared.”

“It is I; be not afraid.” Well, beloved friends through the mercy of
God may it be so.

* * *

Who walks the waves in wondrous guise
By nature’s laws unstayed?
“’Tis I,” a well-known voice replies;
“’Tis I, be not afraid.”

Thus, when the storm of life is high,
Come, Saviour to my aid;
Come, when no other help is nigh,
And say, “Be not afraid.”

Speak, and my griefs no more are heard;
Speak, and my fears are laid;
Speak, and my soul shall bless the word,
“’Tis I, be not afraid.”

When on the bed of death I lie,
And stretch my hands for aid,
Stand Thou before my closing eye,
And say, “Be not afraid.”

Before Thy judgment-seat above,
When nature sinks dismayed,
O cheer me with Thy word of love!
“’Tis I, be not afraid.”

H. F. Lyte