

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – June 21, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham – 5pm Vigil; 7:15, 8:30, & 11am Sun. Masses – 1,035 words

The fear that Jesus warned against in the gospel is the result of the sin that entered the world “through one man”, as St. Paul related in the second reading. With sin came disorder and death; and one of the disorders that relates to death is the fear of it. Even though we have the promises of God about eternal life, and even though this world so often leaves us dissatisfied, yet we instinctively fear death; we fear what it will take for us to leave this earth and pass over to the perfect order and tranquility of eternal life in heaven with God.

But St. Paul also said that the grace of God has overflowed because of sin. In other words, we are not without an antidote. Though we must contend with all the disorders that flow from the reality of sin, yet God still offers us what we need to be saved. So Christ’s threefold command in today’s gospel – “fear no one”, “do not be afraid”, and again, “do not be afraid” – is no cheap advice. What he commands us to do, he also offers us the grace to accomplish. Through God’s grace, it is possible to overcome fear and live securely with him.

What do we fear? What have we feared? Nuclear war. Running out of fossil fuels. Financial collapse. Terrorism. Climate change. Various sicknesses, including the present malaise. Those are just a few examples of societal calamities. But then we each have our personal fears, ranging from, let’s say, things like spiders to the loss of one’s reputation. Yet no matter what things we fear, there is not one of them to which our Lord would not respond: “be not afraid... rather, be afraid of [losing your soul]”, to paraphrase the gospel.

Is Jesus not worthy of our complete trust? Could he possibly tell a lie? Then why do we resist him so, especially in this area of fear? Well, maybe it’s not so much that we resist, but that we feel we can’t help ourselves. Fear is a response over which we often – at least at first – have little control. It arises quite spontaneously. But it can also be brought under control and ultimately overcome. We need not be enslaved to our passions. But where do we begin? What concrete steps can we take to unlock and cooperate with God’s grace?

The first thing should be fairly obvious, but in fact, is often not the starting point for many. And that is: we must admit that we are fearful, what we fear, and if we know it, why – to ourselves and to God. It is all too easy to live in denial or otherwise wish something away. But living in denial or trying to will an alternative reality is to do violence to ourselves, for we were made for the truth. Such disordered patterns of thinking take us away from reality and may ultimately lead to mental illness. No: we must face reality; we must face our fears.

The second step is to confront reality not in some sort of isolated way, getting “caught up in our heads”, but to do so in the context of prayer. But here we need to be careful, too, for it is easy – and sort of gratuitous – just to say to the Lord, “take this from me!”. Remember what I preached on last week, about offering ourselves to God. If you missed that, the homily is online. We need to have an experience of handing our fears to the Lord as we show him our wounds and seek his healing peace. A quick “take it away!” cannot accomplish this.

In this connection, the Holy Rosary can often be of great help. Think, for example, of the third joyful mystery – the birth of our Lord: as I tell the beads and meditate, I might see myself kneeling beside the crèche, recognizing that that little baby is the all-powerful God who became man to save me, then putting my fears with the rough straw upon which he lays. Or, with the fifth sorrowful mystery – the Crucifixion: I might admit that, like the other disciples, I, too, would have fled for fear; but then I might ask St. John, the Magdalene, and Our Lady to bring me with them there and help me relinquish my fears at the feet of the crucified Savior.

Admitting that we are afraid and then bringing that truth about ourselves into the context of our prayerful self-offering to God: those are two concrete steps that we can take. But there is a

third and final one that I would like to mention, and it has to do with the sacramental life. If our fears have any connection with sin at all, even if it is only venial sin, then we should confront them within the Sacrament of Confession, and so receive the special sacramental graces that can help us overcome them. Confession is a powerful channel of healing grace!

And with Holy Communion, apart from the privileged moment of prayer with Christ himself present in us, there is also the fact that our communion is not only with Christ but with each other. One of the devil's tools is not only to make us feel afraid but to make us feel alone in our fear. But at the moment of a good and worthy communion, we are united with the whole Church: saints and sinners throughout the world, some of whom struggle with the same fears; and all the saints, who have won the victory and call us to join their number.

Jesus tells us many times in the gospels not to be afraid; moreover, he models that command by unwaveringly facing death for our sake. Yet, how often have we failed to heed his teaching or counted it impossible to fulfill! But if we are honest about our fears with ourselves and with God, work through offering them with ourselves to God in prayer, and use the sacraments to our advantage, we can most certainly move from fear to freedom. If there were any time we needed to live out this teaching, it is now! May God grant us that grace.