

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 12 Year A 2020

Say something once in the gospel we listen to it and take it seriously. Say it three times, then we really better take notice of it! The gospel portion today has our Lord say thrice, '*Be not afraid.*' The repetition certainly works for emphasis. But in fact, *be not afraid* occurs something like 150 times in the record of scripture. So it, and variations of it – *have no fear; do not be dismayed* – is the most repeated phrase in all of the Bible. The entire Old Testament has this golden thread woven through it. And in the gospels, it most frequently occurs as an assurance in the face of a mighty work of God. The annunciations to both Joseph and Mary has the angel say, *be not afraid*. When the angel appears to the shepherds, *do not be afraid*. When Jesus walks on the water, he says to the disciples, *be not afraid*. In Matthew at the Transfiguration, Jesus says to the disciples who have fallen to the ground in stunned awe, *get up, do not be afraid*. And in this same gospel on Easter morning, the angel says to the women, *Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified*. When they encounter the risen Lord once more, he says to them, *Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me*.

When faced with the *mysterium tremendum* - the tremendous mystery – surely it is most appropriate to tremble in fear. The wonder of coming face to face with God's action in the world ought to unsettle us, shake us, unnerve us. When confronted by his grace and power - with God's very presence - the only appropriate response is to fall down, to turn aside, to tremble. In wonder yes, but in awe as well. Terrified awe perhaps! Encountering God *must* awaken in us a profound sense of unworthiness. So, rightly, then *must* the prophet, the angelic messenger or Christ himself say, *be not afraid*. God reaches out into our world to save and to heal. *Be not afraid!* God is on our side! He is for us! He is with us! He calls us to life and communion with him.

It is a truth of the Gospel that when we respond to God's invitation to life, when we accept Christ's invitation to follow him, our lives change! God breaks into our world and we can only turn aside and fall down in holy fear. But if we allow God to break into *our very lives*, well, then there are going to be ripples and reverberations that are felt and seen by those around us. Some will see this and want to know more. *Tell me, why is your life different?* But others, well others, will be repulsed... St John tells us some *love the darkness rather than the light*. For some God's work in the world and God's work in us will *not* inspire awe, but terror, and so will seek to extinguish it.

And so, our Lord's words in the gospel today: *have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. And, Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.* Do not be afraid! The ten verses prior to our gospel portion today has our Lord outline precisely the kind of hardship and opposition his followers can expect: being handed over; being dragged before governors and kings; being betrayed by brothers; children rising against their parents; being hated by all because of his name...

Earlier in the chapter, Jesus empowered his disciples to do the things he has been doing: to cast out demons, to heal people with every kind of sickness, to proclaim the good news of the kingdom. It is a small miracle that Jesus trusts them with such spiritual authority so early in their understanding of who he really is. This miracle of Jesus' confidence in his twelve bumbling disciples offers us hope. But this is the whole point really. The disciples *share* in his work. *We*, as followers of Jesus, share in his work. And so, as Jesus' work brought him opposition, misunderstanding and hostility, so we too – sharing in his work – ought to expect opposition, misunderstanding, hostility. Not easy when it happens. Not nice when we experience it. And so, Christ's words: *be not afraid.*

Now, our Lord doesn't sugar-coat the dangers of the mission; he gives it to us straight: *"Some people will welcome the Good News, others won't. They'll resist the message and the change that comes with it. And you'll be the target of their resistance."* We might ask then, well, is this the Good News? So much for getting comfort from scripture for the week ahead.... But, for the follower of Jesus, perhaps the question is *not*, *"Why do things go wrong for those of us with a relationship with God?"* The questions ought perhaps to be, *"Why are things going so well!? Why aren't we having more problems? Why am I not being persecuted?"* This whole section of Matthew gospel makes it clear: this is our lot. This is what we can expect.

How peculiar it is, then, that one of the marks of the contemporary church in our cultural context is to ignore this completely! We see this play out most clearly in the adoption of every progressive social cause the last 60 years. Our formation, by and large in the mainstream churches, has precisely been to avoid hardship or critical critique. How often has the argument been to 'get with the program', to 'be on the right side of history'? We hear, *'We need to reflect the spirit of the age.'*

If not, people will think we are irrelevant. People won't listen to us if we don't change.' These are arguments of those who are expressing an aversion to hardship, who are simply seeking social respectability. The consistent pressure put on those within the church has been to smooth over the rough edges, to make our involvement in the wider culture easy, to make it soft, effectively to make it disappear.

But this is a mystery of faith: when things are difficult it is precisely the sign we are heading in the right direction!! Jeremiah did exactly what God asked of him, and he was laughed at, put into prison and eventually killed. Jesus was put to death. His disciples were killed for their faith. But Jeremiah would say, *My persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail.* So convinced is he that a few verses later, while people are still laughing at him, Jeremiah proclaims, *Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.* And Jesus tells his followers, *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.* The key to responding to challenges in faith is not to change direction and find an easier, less offensive path. But to have confidence in God's presence and mercy.

Our Lord does not promise smooth sailing. On the contrary he warns that storms will come. But in the tempests of life, we are not to be fearful. Our Lord in the gospel here is *not* giving us some sort of pep-talk to help us cope with the troubles of life, that come to us all. The context is quite clear. His words of counsel and comfort is for those who hold fast and stand up for the Name of Jesus. When our faith leads us to make public stands that are not popular, opposition will come. Problems will arise. This is to be expected. But we also know that we do not face these problems alone.

The anchor has long been a symbol in Christian art for the hope that we have in Jesus. Though storms may come, *we have* a sure and certain hope that can anchor us to the rock. Hold fast to the rock of faith. Do not be afraid. When all around it seems that we are spinning out of control, when trouble comes, count on your faith in God to provide the firm ground on which you can stand. Don't give up on it. Don't go in the other direction where it appears easy and cosy. Jesus didn't promise us a life of ease and respectability. But he did promise that those who hold fast, who remain true to him, will be remembered before the very throne of heaven. Amen.