

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

[*Jeremiah 20:10-13; Psalm 69; Romans 5: 12-15; Matthew 10: 26-33*]

Sacred Scripture today addresses a reality that is a stranger to none of us: fear. For some time now we have been understandably afraid of COVID-19 and its repercussions. Yet this is not our only reason for fear. Quite apart from our reaction to the virus, we also have a tendency to respond with anxiety to personal challenges such as illness, family strife, and an uncertain future, or to broader issues like the social unrest and geopolitical instability that surround us.

The sacred texts themselves speak of a fear that can easily inhabit the Christian disciple, namely, that of persecution. Just prior to what we hear Jesus say this morning, he had been speaking to his disciples of the persecution they would face as his followers. That did happen, as we know, just as it had befallen the prophet Jeremiah centuries before because of his fidelity to the Lord's call (cf. *Jer. 20:10-13*). Today we need no convincing that this will come to us, too. We already see it, in fact. Society has grown allergic to the Gospel, to the point that Christians known for their faith can find themselves marginalized or mocked, passed over for promotion, at risk of losing their professional license, and so on. Christians in other countries are facing persecution far worse than we do, to the point of being forced to leave their homes or country or even losing their lives.

Understandably, all of this can leave us fearful and anxious. Indeed, the more I meet with people, the more it becomes evident that anxiety is widespread and deep. How are we to deal with this? How are we called as Christians to face our fears? That's the question placed before us by the sacred texts. The witness of Sacred Scripture does not allow a response that is in any way pollyanish or naïve. The Bible does not shy away from the fact that the world does hold many dangers, the most fearsome of which is the evil one, the devil, who, as Jesus himself points out today, seeks to destroy both body and soul. At the same time, the Word of God does not allow us to give fear the last word. It shows us the way to face our fears squarely and realistically such that we are no longer held captive by them. That way is trust in the love of the Father.

Three times in today's brief passage from St. Matthew's Gospel (10:26-33), Jesus says to the disciples, and to us: "Don't be afraid." Then he points to the reason why we can let go of fear. Listen again to what he says: "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 on your head are counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." (10:29-31) The reason for fearlessness is the Father's love for us. This is one instance among many in the Gospels where Jesus insists upon the love of our Heavenly Father, and calls his disciples to trust in Him. Here he is saying that our Father in heaven sees and knows everything going on in our lives, even the smallest details, and will allow nothing to stand between us and His love. When the Father raised Jesus from the dead, the infinite power of His love over all that is evil was on full display. This is the love in which Jesus invites us to place our full trust. Don't be afraid.

As we hear and ponder these words of the Lord, our anxiety begins to dissipate. Yet fear can be so powerful a force in our lives that questions persist. How do I have access to the Father? He dwells far away in Heaven, does he not? To answer these questions, we need to notice a subtle shift in the words used by Jesus as he speaks of the Father. At one point in the passage he speaks

to the disciples about “your Father,” then at the end makes reference to “my Father.” This is of enormous significance; the distinction between “your” and “my” takes us to the very heart of Christianity. The point is this: we do have access to the Father because in Jesus He has adopted us as His very own children! By the gift of the Holy Spirit in Baptism, Jesus, the only Son of God, has made us his brothers and sisters, which means that, in him, we have become sons and daughters of the Father. His Father is now our Father. This is the wondrous truth that St. Paul is pondering in the difficult passage we have from his letter to the Romans (5:12-15). Paul is teaching that the separation from God caused by the original sin of Adam has been overcome by God’s free gift in Christ, a gift he describes elsewhere in his letters as our adoption in Christ as children of God.

Father’s Day helps us see what all this means in practical terms. Today, our hearts and minds turn to our earthly fathers, to the ones we call Dad. The word Jesus used to address his Father is similar, *Abba*, an Aramaic word whose English translation comes very close to “Daddy”. It expresses the close intimacy and absolute trust that Jesus placed in the Father. Because Jesus has made us with him children of his *Abba*, we can call upon the Father with the same freedom and trust that he did, and live with the same child-like confidence that our Father will hear our every prayer and respond to our every need. No need for fear.

So, as we approach the altar this morning, whether here in the Church or remotely through livestream, let’s consider what is worrying or troubling us. What is causing us fear? Take time to consider this. Whatever it is, big or small, let us offer it through Christ to the One who is his Father and ours, and who loves us more than we could ever imagine. The Father will not refuse the prayers of His Son, so when at mass we offer our prayers in union with those of Christ, we are certain that He hears us, too, and responds. We are the Father’s children. He loves us; He is with us. Don’t be afraid.

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith
St. Joseph’s Basilica

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