

20140622SecondAfterPentecostSermon

Fear. Is there any more pervasive or powerful motivating force in our human experience? From the moment we are born, we learn to fear the world around us. As children we are taught to fear the stranger, sometimes to fear even those who are closest to us. Political leaders have long realised that fear can be a useful tool to persuade voters. It was fear of Weapons of Mass Destruction that convinced the Western powers that Iraq and Afghanistan should be invaded. Fear also is the driving force behind vast segments of our economy especially the pension and investment sectors where the fear of not having enough money for retirement is used to enforce us to save.

You will see on the Pew Leaflet that the theme I've chosen for this Sunday, based on our four readings is "Fear Not". "Fear not" is something Jesus seems to be constantly saying to his disciples. And fear can take so many forms. Fear of physical danger, fear of failure, fear of not fitting in. That is perhaps a typical teenage fear; but not only them. Jeremiah felt in the same boat as we hear in an OT reading.

God put Jeremiah in a difficult position; a position that Jeremiah didn't want to be in. God told him to shout out, 'Violence and destruction!' to the people. You can imagine if I went about shouting, 'Violence and destruction!' I would soon be mocked – as Jeremiah was. He was just not fitting in, but more importantly, he knew he could not ignore God just in order to fit in. His friends and enemies try to catch him out but Jeremiah knows he has to go on. Why? Well, he himself gives the answer *12 O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous, // you see the heart and the mind; // let me see your retribution upon them, // for to you I have committed my cause.* Because of this he can only but *Praise God.*

Jeremiah is fearful but his fear is removed because he is doing what God had called him to do. But God's intervention doesn't always bring divine empathy. We cannot assume that God has chosen us and perhaps not others. Many cry out to God and many cries are not heard. Many mothers helplessly watch their children dying. Many parents fail despite their best efforts to provide for their families. Surely God has not abandoned them, or their children? Life is uncertain, and many factors are at work in every situation. Our cries for help are part of a myriad of other voices and influences within which God is at work, sometimes achieving, other times being countered, in the quest for God's goals. So if some "supernatural" answer doesn't seem to be coming from God, then **we** must be the hands and hearts of God. We need to be the ones who support rejected women and families. We must be partners in God's quest for healing and wholeness. Without our human and naturally felt interventions, the hungry may not be fed and the thirsty may not receive comfort. We can not leave it all to God all the time.

In the Psalm, the Psalmist tells his own story which is a lament so similar to Jeremiah's. The Psalmist seems to bewail his position and doesn't find an answer by the time we reach the last verse. Jeremiah, on the other hand, realises that the fear and the problems he is going through is God's way of testing so he can still *Sing to the Lord* and say *Praise the Lord*

How do some of these situations arise in the first place? Why was Jeremiah fearful? Why was the Psalmist bewailing his position? Did not they perhaps deserve to be where they were because they had sinned against God? And us in our own fearfulness, isn't that the result of sin? Maybe; but Jeremiah **was** following God's specific calling. Psalmist says merely, *For your sake have I suffered reproach : and shame has covered my face.* Why? Perhaps he was resisting peer pressure "Ag, come on" his friends are saying "everybody does it..." But the psalmist doesn't want to do it.

In our 2nd reading the Apostle Paul recognizes the life-destroying power of sin and he also equally recognizes the saving power of Christ. Some commentators and spiritual writers speak of the Christian journey as a constant dying process. This is what Paul is saying. We die to the past, to sin, and to old behaviours. We rise to new possibilities and an open future. Dying involves losing the fearful individualistic self, and opening oneself to a larger vision of reality. No longer imprisoned by the past, we journey forth with new life, resurrection life.

Jesus recognizes that fear will also cause the failure of discipleship in his disciples, both then and now. The whole of chapter 10 of Matthew is preparing his disciples for their missionary journey. Jesus' disciples had courageously left the security of their homes and families to follow him as they proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God, but they, too, will know and ultimately bow before the power of fear. So, as Jesus prepares his disciples for their mission to

the “lost sheep of the house of Israel,” he is starkly realistic about the threats they will face, at the same time he builds the case for why they should not let this fear master them or hinder their witness.

What is interesting is what Jesus offers and demands. On the one hand, the disciples are granted remarkable powers to heal, exorcise demons, cleanse lepers, even to raise the dead. But Jesus denies them money, pay, extra clothes, a staff for protection, even sandals. They are to undertake their mission in complete vulnerability and dependence on God. So Jesus highlights the horrors that await the disciples. By naming aloud the suffering they might endure is the first step in freeing them from their fear. Name it and shame it. Even in our Gospel this morning from the latter half of Matthew 10 he continues to describe worst case scenarios, wound together with statements of reassurance and repeated calls not to fear.

“Do not fear” is the dominant, recurrent message in Gospel passage. But first Jesus offers a warning: whatever fate awaits teachers or masters also awaits their disciples and slaves (10:24-25). If Israel’s elites call Jesus “the prince of demons” (cf. 9:34, 12:24), the disciples should be ready for a similar response. “So have no fear of them” (10:26). Even though doing so will bring suffering, the gospel must be proclaimed “in the light and from the housetops” (10:27), for the gospel proclaimed and lived is the most powerful tool at the disciples’ disposal against the powers of this world. And the tool used by the powers of this world is fear.

Jesus’ next expression of reassurance addresses the fear of the threat of death itself. Jesus addresses it directly, yet with irony (10:28-31). It is human political powers that use the fear of death as their main weapon. And Jesus tells us that they have power only to kill the body, not the whole person – not the soul. God alone can destroy both soul and body (10:28); God alone, therefore, is the one we should fear. Jesus then reassures the disciples that God is not like the powers of this world. God knows and cares even for the sparrows that are sold “two for a penny.” God knows even the hairs on our heads better than we do (10:29-31, cf. 6:25-33).

The threat of violence and death are real concerns for the disciples, but no longer the determining force in their lives, for the one who has ultimate power over our whole being exercises that power with mercy and love. Jesus can therefore talk about taking up one’s cross. I do not know about you, but this is pretty fearful thing for me to do but when we do, we lose out life and in so doing lose ourselves and then we find eternal life. Dying to yourself, and losing your life, takes us beyond the anxieties of the moment to rest safely in God; because what dies are the habits of individualism, greed, and self-interest. What is lost is spiritual narrowness. What dies is the sense of threat from others, who are seen as competitors and enemies. What is born is compassion and freedom.

So, Today’s readings ask us to consider the following. What constrains our spirits, that is, what artificial limits do we place on ourselves. What unjustified fears do we have? If, through baptism we have died with Christ and through his resurrection have new life, what has been reborn for us, to open us to eternal life? What will be reborn if we let go of the safe, self-interested approaches to life and trust God’s open-spirited path to the future? Won’t that be an exciting experience for us?

The answers to fear, then, includes a clear-eyed recognition of the conflict and division that the gospel inevitably brings, but also especially includes the deep awareness and conviction that God is present in the world, in mercy and compassion. So ‘Fear not’ because that is what Jeremiah knew in his heart of hearts and he could say *Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.*