

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(1Kings 19:9a.11-13a / Matthew 14:22-33)
09.08.2020
Fears

Terrified, fearful and frightened... these three words are found in our Gospel reading and are applied to the disciples and Peter. They could easily be applied to many of our contemporaries today. We live in a world where many people, from all religions and backgrounds, are driven by terror, fear and fright. Let us not put the whole blame on Covid-19! Brexit, Trump, Putin, and the Chinese government predate the present pandemic, not only are they signs of the many fears at work in our hearts but they perpetuate and feed them.

The problem exists also in our Churches. In our countries, there are many Christians, Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox, who feel under siege, people who because they do not know how to cope with modern society take refuge in an idealised past, dreaming of a golden theological and liturgical age. These people become verbally aggressive against those they regard to be bad Christians because they do not rally behind their battle flag.

Fear is a very challenging and powerful sentiment. In a positive way it can be a force for self-protection but it also leads us to become obsessed with controlling things and people and it is at the root of all forms of discrimination and racism.

To all, Jesus says: "Do not be afraid!"

These words are repeated over and over again throughout the Sacred Scriptures because, in fact, they deal with what is the greatest challenge to faith: fear which sows the seeds of mistrust and distrust between us and God and between each other.

From the book of Genesis where we are told that Adam and Eve "hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God" because they were afraid (3:8-10) to the book of Revelation where the Son of Man says: "Do not be afraid" (1:17), we see that the great enemy of humanity in its relationship with God, the real threat to our calling to become truly human is fear. It is that deep fear to love and to be loved, to connect in truth with God, with others and with ourselves.

In our Gospel reading today the disciples in the boat are so afraid that they are unable to recognise Jesus, they think that "it is a ghost." Their inability to see the Lord shows that one of the first consequences of fear is to blur our vision, to obscure it. When we are afraid, we do not see people and situations for what they really are but only as threats. We see only what fear wants us to see.

Obviously there are people and situations which are dangerous but we are talking here of irrational and unchecked fears which are not faced and dealt with properly but allowed to become the driving force of our decisions and actions. These fears transform all those who think differently or disagree with us into threats.

Our longing for security can lead us to build walls around ourselves and to establish very rigid and restrictive boundaries which delimit who is in and who is out. Because fear breeds control, the boundaries which at the start were a way to protect us become a way to control people and situations.

So fears blur our vision. Fears also weaken us. When Peter "took fright he began to sink." Fear makes us weak because it cuts us off from God and from those around us. It creates a vicious circle where fear isolates us and isolation increases our fears.

This is why the present pandemic is a real challenge for all of us. The fear to be contaminated demands a form of isolation, but the isolation may increase our insecurity and fears, at a personal or societal level. The safety measures which are required of us at the

moment are necessary in order to mitigate the threat of contamination but they can also enhance fear of the other, fear of being with others.

When Jesus says: “Do not be afraid”, he does not mean that we should never feel afraid. Jesus knows that fear is an adaptive emotion that serves to mobilize energy to deal with potential threat. What he means is that in order to channel the feeling of fear properly and in a healthy way we need to remember that we cannot go it alone or do it alone, without him and without one another.

It is in our belonging to a body whose head is Christ that we can withstand threats and challenges. The sure ground on which we can stand is Jesus Christ himself. St Paul expresses the same idea when he prays: “May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” (Eph 3:17)

Love is the key here. While as we said, fear breeds control, true love is about surrender and risk. While fear is about keeping life secure, love is about making life alive. In our obsession with security and control we stifle life, we make it small and narrow, only love makes it flourish and bear much fruit.

Peter sinks in the water because his faith is fearful, small and tepid, because it is not inflamed by the fire of love. St John reminds us that “perfect love casts out fear” (1Jn 4:18). Maybe instead of fixing his attention on the wind, Peter should have kept his eyes fixed lovingly on Christ, there he would have found the strength to overcome the wind and his fears.

Christ’s love, his loving gaze upon each one of us (cf. Mk 10:21), the promise of his presence by our side always (cf. Mt 28:20), the gift of his Spirit as helper and comforter, his love at work in the hearts of so many brothers and sisters in humanity should remind us that we have nothing to fear but fear itself (cf. Montaigne).

With the psalmist, we can say: “O Most High, when I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I am not afraid; what can flesh do to me?” (56:2-3)