

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

(Job 38:1.8-11 / Mark 4:35-41)

20.06.2021

*Fears*

The Israelites were not a seafaring people. In our Gospel reading, the disciples in the boat were struggling with a deep-seated fear, rooted in ancestral and religious feelings and beliefs. They were afraid of the sea, of its formidable power and their inability to tame it. They perceived the sea as a satanic abyss and a force of disorder. The author of the book of Revelation bears witness to their hope when he writes: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more" (Rev 21:1).

For us today, whether we are afraid of the sea or not, whether we can swim or not, the struggle of the disciples and Jesus' words speak to us at two levels: firstly, the boat shaken by the wind and the raging sea speaks to us of our personal lives, when wounds and betrayals hurt us, when ills and deaths weigh us down, when we feel uprooted, overwhelmed and lose sight of a possible future. At a second level the boat is a traditional image of the Church tossed to and fro by persecution from outside and scandals and infidelity from within.

Whether we consider our personal lives or the life of the Church the first thing to say is that it is normal sometimes to be afraid. When Jesus asks: "Why are you so frightened?" I do not think he means that people who have faith should never be afraid. Fear is a feeling that has its place in our psychological and religious make up. To impose on us never to be afraid would certainly prevent us from being truly human. Allow me to believe that the challenge is not to be unafraid but to channel our fears in a life-giving way, to deal with them in the right way. The questions for us are: "Do we allow our fears to be the only driving force of our decisions and actions? Are we so concerned by our security, so protective of our ideas and institutions that every disagreement and all differences, are perceived as threats to be removed by every means?"

While the feeling of fear can positively spur us on to be more attentive to a person or a situation, more focused on what really matters in life, it can also lead us to panic and more often than not to become violent.

At the moment, at both the religious and political levels, there are many people who feed and pamper our fears and feelings of insecurity. They suggest that we must build walls, they promote self-sufficiency, scapegoating, discrimination and excommunication as means to make us feel strong and secure.

It is clear that all these ways of dealing with our fears are illusory and dangerous.

In the *Divine Comedy*, while he is visiting hell, Dante is given the following advice: "Only one thing should be feared that have power to do us ill, nothing else, for nothing else is fearful" (II:88-90).

Here lies the great challenge for us, for our Churches and our countries: to discern properly what our fear is about. Is the cause of our fear life threatening or life-enhancing? Is what we perceive as a threat a real threat to our life and identity or an opportunity for us to be enriched in our life and identity, a challenge which will allow us to go deeper in our self-knowledge, in the knowledge of God and of others?

Ultimately the question is whether or not we want to live as slaves of our fears. The same question was posed to the Christians in Rome and St Paul reminded them that they "did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear" (Rm 8:15).

When Jesus asks the disciples in the boat: “How is it that you have no faith?” he gives them the key to freedom from fear: faith which prevents fear from leading us where we do not want to go, from acting in ways that are not life-giving.

Faith, trust in God’s action in ourselves and in others, helps us to name our fears without shame and to traverse them with courage and hope.

It is important to note that when Jesus challenged the disciples about their faith, he did not necessarily mean that they should have had faith in God directly calming the sea by a great act of power. In fact he was aiming at their need for a healthy self-confidence which should have allowed them to make their way through the storm, using their God’s given skills and wisdom as experienced fishermen. Today Jesus reminds us that we should have faith in God working in and through us, a God who is not distant but close to us; a God who is with us as we struggle for meaning, justice and a free and peaceful life.

When we allow our fears to enslave us, then either we give up the struggle and become paralysed or we are encouraged to act irrationally and violently. Unfortunately, in the United Kingdom with Brexit, in Northern Ireland with its political situation as it is unfortunately we know what it is to be enslaved by irrational fears, enclosed in narrow cultural ghettos.

To trust in God does not mean that nothing frightens us or that we underrate the power of evil forces at work in the world and in our hearts. To the contrary our faith in God, faith in his presence and action within and around us, makes us wise and strong in the way we deal with our fears. While our fears tend to close all doors, to darken the horizon and shut down all hope, faith opens up new doors, lightens the horizon and awakens hope.

Here in Northern Ireland as we approach the marching season, in our Churches, in society and in our families, may all those who claim to be Christians speak words of faith, that faith which, according to the author of the letter to the Hebrews, “administered justice, obtained promises, and quenched raging fire” (11:33-34).

Let us not allow our fears to speak too loudly to us, or they will lead us to the land of alienation and violence. May we listen to the voice of the Lord, the loving and hopeful voice of faith which leads to life.