

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Jeremiah 20:10-13 / Matthew 10:26-33)
25.06.2023

Do not be afraid

Dear brothers and sisters,

The gospel passage we have just heard is a collection of disparate sayings which come from the end of Jesus' missionary discourse to his twelve apostles. In these eight verses, the words "**Do not be afraid**" came back three times. These words are like the thread that holds together a bunch of unrelated verses. I propose that we ponder over these words of Jesus this morning.

When Jesus tells his disciples 'not to be afraid', when Jesus calls upon each one of us here and now 'not to be afraid', He is not speaking of those passing fears with which our daily lives are filled.

When Jesus tells us 'not to be afraid', He is speaking of that fear which invades the believers when they have to bear witness to their faith in Jesus; the fear that emerges when they are called upon to testify to their love and their attachment for Christ in times of difficulty; their fear to be mocked, ridiculed; their fear to be considered naïve, immature, credulous, out of date or even mad. We all know quite well the kind of fear to which Jesus refers here: the fear of bearing witness to Him in a world which thinks that it does not need God, a world which is indifferent, and even sometimes hostile to any idea of God.

When Jesus tells us not to be afraid, He speaks also of our fear of persecution, a reality about which he has spoken in the verses just previous to today's gospel passage: "you will be hated on account of my name" (22).

If we were to ask Jesus what could help us to cope with this kind of fear, his answer might seem strange to us. Once more, we find it in the verses preceding today's gospel passage: "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. If they called the master of the house 'Beelzebul', how much more the members of his household".

What is implied here is that the reason for us not to be afraid is that our destiny reproduces the destiny of Jesus. As disciples, we follow Jesus, not just in regard to one particular aspect of his life which speaks to us, but the whole of his life, including his passion and death. So, our assurance, our audacity as witnesses to Jesus is paradoxical: what protects us from fear is the fact that Jesus, the one we follow, bore witness to his Father's love for humankind until the end, right up to death upon the Cross. So we need not be surprised, we should not fear if we are led to suffer and even give our life for Christ as He gave his life for us. This is easy to say, but it is less easy to live.

Jesus gives us another reason not to be afraid. "Everything that is now covered will be uncovered, and everything now hidden will be made clear". This is Jesus' affirmation that light is already victorious; God accompanies the testimony of his sons and daughters because He wants to unveil, to reveal through them his love for the world.

Again the point is made that we have no need to fear for ourselves and for our message. If we are bearers of the Good News of God, there is no reason to fear physical oppression, opposition or persecution; there is no reason to fear intellectual solitude, or any cultural or historical mutation imposed upon us; there is no reason to fear the loss of any role models – any idols – other than Jesus Christ. The Lord is with us, victorious, giving us a share in his victory.

The only one we should fear, says Jesus, is the one who can destroy body and soul, that is to say God himself. He is the master of life and death. No one else! But here the word fear takes another meaning. We pass from the fear of men and women to what the Bible calls “the fear of God”.

In the bible, the fear of God is a mixture of respect or awe and affection. The fear of God is at one and the same time the sense of the majesty of God and a filial spontaneity to obey Him. The fear of God is the gentleness of humankind – our gentleness – in response to God’s gentleness in our regard. The fear of humankind, the fear of the judgement of humankind paralyzes us. To the contrary the fear of God always awakes within us the best of ourselves. It makes us apt to discern the tenderness of our God who cares so much more for us than for the sparrows. He counts every hair on our head!

The disciple of Jesus is a man or a woman of faith in whom the love for God has banished all human fear and which is ready, in spite of a person’s limits and weaknesses, to confess boldly that Christ is the Saviour and to declare oneself for him before all men and women. This implies believing oneself to be one with the Lord at all times and in all places whether that be a place where Christ is loved or betrayed, sought or rejected.

This testimony of a true disciple, even if it uses all the human resources of the apostle, far surpasses the ability and prestige of the person. It is a grace of God. It is rooted in ones’ friendship with Jesus who died on the Cross for us and who risen from the dead lives within us.

What the disciple declares to the world, what he has the obligation to proclaim from the housetops, it is what God has whispered into the ear of his or her heart. This is the reason for which our witness cannot be aggressive, or constraining, or impatient. Our testimony to Christ comes from a word gently spoken. It is a message of interiority and gentleness wrapped in mercy. It will make itself visible on our face as it did on that of the loving Christ whose compassion was always evident.

We are called to bear witness to the word that the Lord whispers into our hearts: a word of life, a word of hope, a word which resounds in the deepest regions of our being, a word which invites us to stand up and walk with confidence in God’s presence; a word confided to us by the Lord so that we may transmit it to all those whom the Lord loves, all those whom He gives us to love.