



Gospel *St Matthew 10.27—33*

The Common Worship version of this reading is slightly longer – verses 24—39.

At that time Jesus said to them, ‘So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. *Rather fear him* who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. *Fear not, therefore*; you are of more value than many sparrows. So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.’

Homily

Faith in the midst of fear

‘The overcoming of fear: that is what we are proclaiming here’ said Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a wonderful sermon (based on the story of the calming of the storm) from 1933, as fear was gripping Germany. ‘The Bible, the Gospel, Christ, the Church, the faith’, he goes on, ‘are all one great battle cry *against fear* in the lives of human beings.’ (*The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, pp.60—66)

While we continue to cope with the impact of the pandemic (and we must never forget its *global* scale), we hear Jesus raise that battle cry again in the gospel this weekend. The political and social landscape of our lives had been in flux for some years before the virus threw it all up in the air, and brought change to our lives on every level: international, national, local, and personal. And unsurprisingly we’re afraid. Even the preaching of opportunity and optimism by some, seems only to underscore the uncertainty and fear felt by the majority. More and more, listening and talking to others, aware also of my own experience, I hear people talk of ‘struggling’ and of ‘surviving’. ‘Fightings within, and fears without’ as the old hymn puts it. This Sunday’s Gospel speaks direct into this sense of struggle and survival.

In it we find two appeals from Jesus: on the one hand to ‘have *no* fear’ of other human beings, and, on the other, to ‘fear’ God (*Matt* 10.26, 28). Fear is natural. The experiences we have as children are often (though

not always) revealed to be imaginary. As we grow older other fears become more founded in reality: fears we have to face up to, and overcome with determination and trust in others and in God. However, in recent years we've somehow begun to share a deeper form of fear, bordering on a kind of shared anguish, which has emerged from the widespread sense of emptiness and boredom in our culture, from our apparent inability to learn even from our most serious mistakes, and the real need for renewal.

In the face of the broad panorama of human fears, which are as varied as the vulnerabilities we feel, Jesus is clear: those who 'fear' *God* 'are not afraid'. Fear of God, which the scriptures call 'the beginning of knowledge' (*Prov* 1.7), coincides with *trusting* in God, and having a respect for his authority over life and the world, a trust that the psalmist likens to a child: 'my soul is like the weaned child that is with me' (see *Ps* 131.2). 'There is no fear in love', writes the apostle John, 'perfect love *casts out* fear.' (*1 Jn* 4: 18). Believers are not afraid of what the human world can do to them, because they know they are in the hand of God, and that the last word is not left to evil or irrational forces, but rather to the one Lord of all that is, the Lord of a love that casts out fear to such an extent that he faced the Cross for our salvation.

2

So far, so very general. But today's gospel happens in a particular context. The whole chapter is concerned with the Twelve being sent out by Jesus, with all the necessary instructions, warnings, explanations and encouragements needed for their mission. It follows on immediately after Jesus's warning that if people call him Beelzebub (a kind of devil), his disciples can't expect to get much better treatment. The master's lot is the disciple's lot (vv.24-25). Nevertheless, what they have already received in secret—the teaching and instructions and generosity he has shared with them—must be announced publicly, openly. The word of the Lord's mercy and faithfulness *will be proclaimed*. There is no stopping it.

The first consequence of being responsible for proclaiming the Lord's message, is that his disciples—that is, me *and you!*—must learn to proclaim it with frankness, without shame, without being shy or shallow, without fear of the inevitable opposition, even without fear of intimidation and threat (vv. 26-27). The gospel has a word for this attitude: *parrhesia* in Greek. It's a particular mixture of openness, courage, risk and love. It's a way of talking that is concerned for the truth, and takes its strength from the word of God in scripture and Christian tradition, and is willing to be critical at the risk of being hurt. Plainly there's a lot more to be said about it as an attitude to be learned from Jesus, not least so as to be able to understand why, in the company of Jesus, controversy and the forces of opposition to God are likely to grow *more* not less threatening. (But let's leave that for another day.) I want only to bring out one extremely important caveat, because it is very easy for *parrhesia* to be misunderstood and misused by those who enjoy or cope with their own fear by being disruptive, destructive, rude or threatening self-appointed prophets.

In Christian thinking and behaviour truthfulness is called to measure itself by the strength of love and responsibility towards others, and at root towards God. Augustine says that all the virtues that we see at work in human lives (temperance, prudence, justice and courage) are in fact simply *love* in operation, and courage in particular 'is love *readily bearing all things* for the sake of God' (*On the morals of the Catholic Church* 15.25) This is what distinguishes a willingness to take risks and learn tell the truth about Jesus and his salvation, from simply letting our fears make us get defensive or manipulative. In the company of Jesus the very people who could give us *reason* to be afraid become a *source* of courage thanks to *love*, they become an opportunity for the victory of love over fear. We can *become* courageous not only because of the One who loves us—the Father of all mercies—but because of those whom *we* love. When courage is rooted in love, fear is overcome.

I find this such a fruitful thought. It helps unlock so much of the history of Christian attempts to be faithful to the truth of Jesus, especially at times and in places of change in human culture. Like the places where Christians find themselves facing persecution, or like the one we have been passing through in the western world for some time, and which the virus is sure (in this as in so much else) to have accelerated. Jesus' words build for us a pathway that leads from his encouragement not to be afraid (which they plainly needed to hear, or he wouldn't have said it!), to an invitation to trust, to a more confident abandonment on God. Moreover, in the mouth of Jesus, the expression 'do not fear' is a promise as well as guidance, because it expresses his trust in us. It means, 'you are capable of overcoming fear by counting on my presence, on my

promise, on my help.’ Have we not been celebrating since the Ascension his promise, ‘I am with you always, even to the end of the age’? ‘I am with you’ because I am your advocate with the Father who loves you; ‘I am with you’ by giving you the other Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, who lives in you; ‘I am with you’ in the Eucharist that makes you one, and that heals you in soul and body. For the Church *this relationship* with the risen Jesus is the foundation of courage, the liberation from fear, the source of love for others.

3

As we look to the horizon, and to the Church’s responsibilities in a world that will have overcome the pandemic and be looking for a renewed future, we shall need to depend on the fact that faith ‘*draws its strength* from weakness’ (*Heb 11.34*). The courage of faith consists not in *denying* weakness, but in recognizing it and transforming it. The Church will not grow in faith if it seeks to evade its weakness and smallness, and seeks instead its safety and protection and success at all costs. The real enemy of faith and hope is the fear of being small, fear of sharing our intimacy with God, fear of trusting others without knowing how or if we will be repaid.

Generations of Christians before us have found Jesus’s words, ‘Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body’ to be a reminder of their dependence on him, and we need to rediscover those words for ourselves now. If we are afraid we will make ourselves more dependent on those who wish to harm or diminish the Church’s witness. But more importantly, if we are afraid we will not be able to *love* as we should. How can a church that feeds on its fears and calculations announce the joyful news of salvation to the world? How can we love one another if we seek to protect ourselves? How can we tell the good news if we are afraid of the world? How can we preach (and it *is* ‘we’!) if we are paralyzed?

4

I realized this week (and I speak as a former professional singer) that in these last few months I have *sung* less than I ever have in my whole life. Personally speaking, singing together again is one thing I look forward to hugely – and with it, ‘praying double’ as Augustine says. Then the words of another old hymn (from Paul Gerhart’s ‘The golden sun’), which Bonhoeffer quoted in that same sermon early 1933, may help us:

This world must fall,
God stands o’er all,
His thoughts unswayed,
His Word unstayed,
His will for all our ground and hope.

Prayer

Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings within, and fears without,
O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am, thou wilt receive,
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
Because Thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come!