

Witnessing in spite of fear: The Twelfth Sunday of the Year.

A man went to the airline counter. The ticket agent asked, "Sir, do you have reservations?" He replied, "Reservations? Of course I have reservations, but I'm flying anyway."

In the Gospel Jesus calls for witnesses, that is, people who are not afraid to be seen to be followers of his out there in the midst of a skeptical and sometimes hostile world. Fear is one of the things that keeps Christians from a bold and generous witnessing to the Gospel. **Three times Jesus said to the apostles, 'Do not be afraid.'**

Pope John Paul II had as his motto: "Be not afraid." Of course, he was quoting our Lord whom we just heard give the same mandate to his apostles in today's gospel, "Do not be afraid." Since God knows how many hairs are on our head and is aware when even a little sparrow dies, then he's aware of every detail of our own lives. Although he is aware, and cares, he does not guarantee us that bad things will not happen to us. Ups and downs are part of our existence and they even happened to God's holy prophets and to Jesus himself. Because God is aware and he cares he tells us not to fear, for he is in control and will make everything turn out right for those who are faithful to him.

"Be not afraid." Sometimes that's easier said than done. Fear is built into us and we feel it when we feel threatened. If fear were not a part of our nature, we wouldn't even exist today, because long ago our ancestors would not have had sense to get out of the way of charging wild animals, saber tooth tigers or poisonous snakes. Nor would we be moved to get out of the way of cars and trucks coming at us 50 miles an hour. We would not be putting on these face coverings (masks) that inconvenience us! Fear enables us to survive, to know when to fight, to know when to run. But sometimes it gets out of control and takes over our life, whether that fear comes from a real threat or an imagined one. Faith is a big help to deal with fear, and sharing our fears with a trusted friend can be helpful, but sometimes fear is so controlling that counseling or medication is required at times. I think when Jesus tells us not to fear, he's not talking about the spontaneous reaction we feel when we are threatened, he's telling us not to worry and to put our trust in him that things will come out alright in the end.

When Jesus sent the apostles out to proclaim his teaching openly and to witness to him before the world, he knew that they were fearful. And they had good reason to be fearful, knowing that they would have to face hardship and persecution. So, not once but three times he said to them, 'Do not be afraid.'

It is normal and natural that courage will sometimes fail us and that we will be afraid. All those who have accomplished great things have known fear at one time or another. We think of the prophet Jeremiah (First Reading), of Martin Luther King, and of Jesus himself in the garden of Gethsemane.

Fear is not necessarily a bad thing. Fear sometimes has a protective function, as I have just mentioned in case of our wearing our masks today. Fear can be a warning of the presence of danger. In this case, fear is a grace.

Nevertheless, fear can be a handicap. It can paralyze a person. It can turn a person into a coward. Jesus knew that the apostles were afraid. He understood their fears and took them seriously. When he said to them, Do not be afraid, he was addressing their fears and trying to allay them. He was trying to give them courage. He was trying to move them beyond fear, knowing that fear could make them so timid as to be unable to fulfil their mission.

How did he suggest they might overcome their fears? Basically through trust in God and reliance on God. He urged them to have complete trust in God, who lovingly watches over the life and death of even the smallest and least valuable of his creatures — the sparrows. Jesus assured them that God knew every detail of their lives, and would support them in every crisis.

So, when Jesus says, 'Not one sparrow falls to the ground without your Father knowing,' he wants us to know how far-reaching and all-embracing is the knowledge and care of God. Everything that happens to any of his creatures, even the most insignificant of them, is seen by God and important to him — yes, even the fall of a single sparrow. The fact that he doesn't prevent this fall, doesn't mean that he is indifferent to it. God is never indifferent about the fate of any of his creatures. If then God is concerned about the sparrows, we can be sure that he is concerned about us who are his children. Still, we have no guarantee that nothing bad will ever happen to us. However, we believe that even should death come, God will take care of us.

Faith is not a comforting illusion that all is well. Rather, it means to know that life is full of risk, full of insecurity, and yet to rejoice in it — that is the essence of faith. Nowadays, thanks to the security camera, we are often being watched, watched by a cold, dispassionate eye intent only on catching us in wrongdoing. The feeling that someone is watching you is not a pleasant feeling. But the feeling that someone is watching over you is a lovely feeling.

God is not watching us. **God is watching over us.** The conviction that God is watching over us gives us comfort, strength and hope especially in times of difficulty and danger. In the end only God can allay our deepest fears. To live a Christian life requires courage. But then any meaningful living requires courage. What is needed in life is not so much heroism as ordinary courage.

Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can't practice any other virtue with constancy. Faith is a great source of courage. As people of faith, we believe that God will give us the strength to cope with whatever comes. The greatest freedom of all is freedom from fear. Unless we can overcome our fears, we cannot live a dignified human life. Nevertheless, fear and courage are not mutually exclusive. They can and do coexist. *Courage is not never being afraid. It is being afraid, and overcoming it, or carrying on in spite of it.* **May the Lord give each of us a brave heart.** Amen.,