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12th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Date: Sunday, June 25, 2017 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** A
First Reading: Jeremiah 20:10–13
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 69:8–10, 14, 17, 33–35 | **Response:** Psalm 69:14c
Second Reading: Romans 5:12–15
Gospel Acclamation: John 15:26b, 27a
Gospel Reading: Matthew 10:26–33
Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein **in the** Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa**.**

In today's Gospel we hear what is in fact one of the most repeated commands in the Bible. It is not 'thou shalt not be corrupt' – though in this country the Church must never tire of saying that. It is, instead, the much simpler, and yet, much more important, "do not be afraid".

"Have no fear of them" Jesus says. "Fear not!"

The disciples, of course, had reason to be afraid. Jesus has just told them that the authorities will go after them; they will suffer physical and emotional violence; they would be rejected and persecuted; and they would be maligned in public, and they should be prepared to risk everything for the Gospel. Yet Jesus says to them 'do not be afraid'.

He doesn't say 'do not be afraid because God will look after you.' – at least not in today's Gospel. We know that God looks after all of us. No, what he says might, for the guilty, induce even more fear. He says that a time will come when everything will be uncovered. Everything that is presently secret will be made known.

For many, this is a further reason to be afraid, not a reason to grow in courage. But Jesus is seeing something that perhaps we are missing.

Jesus is assuming that what will come to light on that day is the disciples' loyalty and faith; they will be seen to have followed Israel's true Messiah, the world's true Lord. Their patience and perseverance will emerge into the light.

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In a sense, Jesus is articulating his confidence and hope in his disciples, in all of us.

He has asked the disciples to preach the Good News, to speak truth to power, and to suffer persecution if necessary. All of this would make the disciples appear foolish in the eyes of the world, but Jesus is saying that on that day, their witness will be apparent. And in between, he will send his Counsellor, the Holy Spirit to strengthen and encourage them.

What may have looked like obstinacy or even arrogance by the world will at last be seen as what it is, a resolute determination to follow the Lord of life wherever he leads. In other words, truth will out, justice will prevail, and those who have lived with integrity and innocence, despite what the world says about them, will be vindicated. That, rather than a quick God-will-look-after-you message, is what Jesus is ultimately offering.

This is good news for us in South Africa. This is good news for people who live and work in a culture that is constantly tempting people with short-cuts and corrupt opportunities. It is good news because if we resist and stand-up for what is right; if we refuse to sell our souls, then Jesus is saying when the times comes for the truth to be revealed, and for people's lies and deceit to be uncovered, then his followers will be shown to be pure and upright. Many people in our country today claim the title 'honourable', but not all of them behave that way. Soon everyone will know what has been done in secret, will be proclaimed from the housetops. We are already experiencing some of this in the media – but Jesus is asserting a confidence in each of us, that he believes Christians will ultimately follow the one God. We will not be blinded by idols of money, power or pleasure at the expense of the common good or our own salvation. We must not be afraid – we should rather take courage.

But wait, I hear you say. Jesus does tell us to fear one thing in the Gospel when he says "fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." If we look closely at the Gospel we might ask ourselves, why does Jesus tell his disciples not to be afraid, then to be afraid, then not to be afraid again, all in the space of a few verses?

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The answer I think is that Jesus believed Israel faced two different sorts of enemies. The first and most obvious enemy for the Jewish people were Rome, and Herod. They were the ones who had the power to kill the body, to persecute and to punish. But Jesus recognized that there were other, darker enemies, who had the power to kill the soul as well: enemies who were battling for that soul even during Jesus' ministry, and who were using the more obvious enemies of Rome and Herod as cover.

Jesus is concerned that the followers of light do not employ the tactics of the dark themselves. One should not respond to evil with evil. Two wrongs, the moral theologians tell us, never make a right. Jesus is warning not to underestimate the evil spirit. But he doesn't leave it there. He makes a promise, noting that God doesn't just know each one of us, but he has in fact gotten to know us, God knows us so well that he know how many hairs we have on our heads.

I think sometimes we may mishear this Gospel. It is not true that when Jesus urges us to fear the one who can destroy body and soul in hell, he is referring to God himself. The point here is precisely the opposite. God is the one we do not have to fear. Indeed, he is the one, often times the only one, we can trust with our lives, our souls, our bodies, our entire being.

We're told this God knows us so intimately, but he wants to keep knowing us. If God, the Gospel writer explains, is concerned with every single sparrow in the sky, and has counted every hair on our heads, then we must be confident that we can ask him anything, for nothing would be too great or too small for him to do for us.

What Jesus is saying is that each one of us is worth more than all the sparrows in the world. We must not be afraid of God – or consider him to be unconcerned with us. We might be tempted, and attacked – as Jesus warns, but we must never fear God.

No matter the persecutions, we must remember that he who we serve is stronger than our strongest enemy.

Satan is a fallen angel – a creature in other words, created by God, not God the Creator's equal. Fear comes from the Devil, and as one politician rightly said, the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

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Let us pray today that we might not fear the future. Let us pray for hope that we might create the future God wants for us all. In our first reading we see some of the hope that Jeremiah is able to muster even in the face of despair and fear. Let us imitate him in praising God. Let us not give in to fear, but be Christians who are hopeful and joyful.

Let us pray that each of us might experience courage, hope, peace and love in our lives – these are the graces that St Paul talks of in his second reading, for these things come from God as fruits of the law, as antidotes and vaccines against sin, and for all of God's graces we give God thanks.

Before we say the Creed, I'd like to share a prayer I came across this week from a Jesuit, James Martin in New York. It's entitled A Prayer for when I feel rejected. For most of us, persecution is not something we face really – not like Christians in other parts of the world – but we can all be rejected and ignored, and in some way that might feed the fears in our lives. The fear of not being accepted, or of missing out, or of not fitting in. He writes:

> Loving God, you made me who I am.
> I praise you and I love you,
> for I am wonderfully made, in your own image.
>
> But when people make fun of me,
> I feel hurt and embarrassed and even ashamed.
> So please God, help me remember my own goodness,
> which lies in you.
>
> Help me remember my dignity,
> which you gave me when I was conceived.
> Help me remember that I can live a life of love,
> because you created my heart.
>
> Be with me, loving God, when people hate me,
> and help me to respond how you would want me to:
> with a love that respects others, but also respects me.
> Help me find friends who love me for who I am.
> Help me, most of all, to be a loving person.

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And God, help me remember that Jesus loves me.
For he was seen as an outcast, too.
He was misunderstood, too.
He was beaten and spat upon.
Jesus understands me,
and loves me with a special love,
because of the way you made me.

And when I am feeling lonely,
help me to remember that Jesus welcomed everyone as a friend.
Jesus reminded everyone that God loved them.
Jesus encouraged everyone to embrace their dignity,
even when others were blind to seeing that dignity.
Jesus loved everyone with the boundless love that you gave him.
And he loves me, too.

One more thing, God:
Help me remember
that nothing is impossible with you,
that you have a way of making things better,
and that you can find a way of love for me,
even if I can't see it right now.

Help me remember all these things
in the heart you created, loving God.

Amen.

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