

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Jeremiah 20:10-13

Psalms 68

Romans 5:12-15

Matthew 10:26-33

It goes without saying that the last few years have been a bit tumultuous. At times it felt like the whole world was enduring a bit of a near-death experience, as we were forced to pull back from life as usual without the comfort of many of our regular distractions. For many people this has brought latent anxieties to the surface, and forced them to face things long buried beneath the surface.

Fear is a natural part of our human condition. It can serve to protect us from danger, but it can also leave us crippled with anxiety and depression. As small children we have a number of fears that are largely illusory and hopefully we outgrow, whereas other fears emerge later in life that are very much founded in reality, and these we strive to overcome with human determination and trust in God. In recent decades one could also argue that there is an increase in a kind of underlying existential anxiety, borne of the emptiness and lack of meaning inherent in much of the nihilistic tendencies of our culture.

Jesus addresses the question of our fears in today Gospel passage, and ultimately offers an antidote for fear, but it's not as simple or straightforward as we might suspect. In this passage we can identify two invitations from Jesus: on the one hand to "have no fear" of human beings, and on the other, to "fear" God. It is therefore worth reflecting on the difference that exists between human fears and the fear of God.

The phrase "fear of God" is an ancient one—at least as old as our scriptures—and a variety of interpretations and indeed baggage has accrued to it over time. For the ancients, fearing the gods was a no-brainer – we're so used to the Christian understanding of God as love that we can forget that the ancient view of the gods was of beings who were powerful, petty, inconsistent and self-interested: they were to be feared for the harm they could do, perhaps to be bargained with or cajoled if possible, to be hidden from if needs be, but certainly not to be trusted or loved.

And many Catholics who grew up prior to the Second Vatican Council can recall how the concept of fearing the Lord was a tangible part of the zeitgeist, sometimes excessively so. In response to such excesses, the pendulum has in many ways swung to the opposite extreme. Indeed, you could argue that many priests have been so careful not come across as a fire-and-brimstone preacher that a concept such as fearing the Lord has almost fallen the consciousness of many Catholics.

The book of Proverbs speaks of the fear of the Lord as "the first stage of wisdom", in part because—if done in an appropriate way—it situates us correctly into the reality of our situation. The term "God" falls off our tongue so easily that we can forget the

enormity and mystery and incomprehensibility of what we're talking about, and in this the ancient worldview did contain a half-truth that many folks have since lost. To be face-to-face with God would be a bit like standing in front of the Sun – it would be too much for us if we're not appropriately prepared for such an encounter. And thus a healthy degree of awe before God—and an awareness of our smallness and creatureliness—is entirely appropriate, and helps us relate to God and the world from a position of humble truth. Fear of God coincides with faith in him, with respect for his authority over life and the world, and to be without “fear of God” is essentially to put ourselves in his place, to consider ourselves the lords of good and evil.

A helpful image might be that of a small child in its mother's arms. To the degree that children are capable of perceiving it, the power difference between an adult and a small child is obvious—the child has a rudimentary form of respect and awe for its parents—and yet this difference is not a threat for the child but a source of comfort: the child feels safer and more at ease in its mother's arms than anywhere else. In a similar way, the believer with a healthy fear of God is capable of being tranquil even in the midst of storms, for—as Jesus revealed to us—our God is a Father full of mercy and tender goodness. Resting in the knowledge that they are held by a good and just God, and not subject to the random whims of a seemingly impersonal universe, believers can rest safe amidst the sorrows of this world.

And so, as the world rolls on after a trying few years, this would be an appropriate time for us to examine our own fears and to invite the Lord to heal our anxieties. What are we afraid of? What do we have to lose? Are we frightened by the thought of losing our wealth? Our social status? The affection of others? Our health, or the health of those we love? Our social influence? Our reputation? Our life?

Perhaps the greatest examples of this freedom from fear are the martyrs, who overcame their fear of death thanks to their fear of God. Take the example of St Thomas More, whose feast day was last week, and who cut a very lonely figure as he remained loyal to the Church in the face of King Henry VIII and the architects of the English Reformation. He proved to be such a thorn in the side of the English crown precisely because of his lack of worldly fear – he couldn't be bullied into line because there was nothing he could be threatened with. In time, King Henry took away More's job, his status, his money, his reputation, his friends, his family, his freedom—each time hoping that he would give in—until finally the king even took away his life. Everyone else he could intimidate, but not More.

That's real freedom. Even though he ended up behind bars and ultimately executed, More was freer than those who remained out of jail but who cowered before the king. And he was also freer than those who were trying to intimidate him and who ultimately had him killed. St Thomas More's last words were: “I die the King's good servant; but God's first.” More was not a revolutionary—he desired to serve his king and country—but he also knew that his primary loyalties belonged with God. His inspiring courage came from the fact that he did fear someone—he had a holy fear of

the Lord—and the one thing he truly feared losing was intimacy and friendship with God. Next to this friendship, he could see that all other concerns paled in comparison.

So in the face of the uncertainties of our present time, may we be encouraged to find our strength and stability in the Lord, who calls us into intimate union with himself, and who sends us out to witness to his goodness in the world. As Pope Benedict XVI once said:

“Dear friends, may no adversity paralyse you. Be afraid neither of the world, nor of the future, nor of your weakness. The Lord has allowed you to live in this moment of history so that, by your faith, his name will resound throughout the world.”