

SPIRITUALITY

Reflecting on the Gospel

It's nearly the end of June and we are celebrating "Ordinary Time," the Twelfth Sunday of such. Easter is over; Pentecost and the feasts that follow have concluded. Now we enter the liturgical period wherein we will read primarily from the Gospel of Matthew (Cycle A), accompanying Jesus throughout this story, growing in our knowledge and awareness of him.

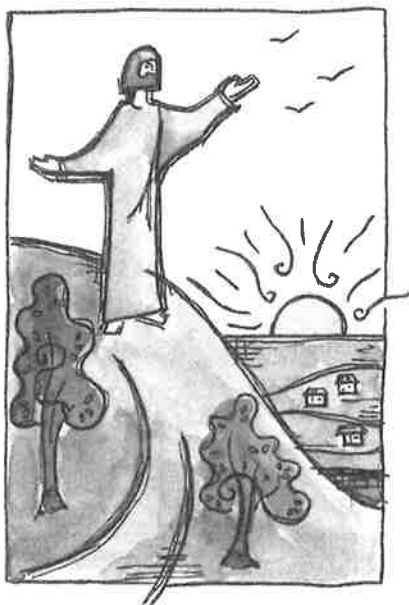
Matthew has long been known as the "church's gospel." We read the Sermon on the Mount, with its standard form of the Lord's Prayer (as opposed to the shorter version in Luke). Matthew tells us about the giving of the keys of the kingdom to Peter, and he uses the phrase "upon this rock I will build my church." In fact, the very term "church" appears in this gospel alone among the others. With an infancy narrative, resurrection narrative, and much material unique to Matthew, the gospel is twenty-eight chapters long. Compare that to the sixteen chapters of Mark, which was considered something of a "reader's digest" version of Matthew. So it's not surprising that the church placed this gospel first in the canon and preferred reading from it at liturgies. Now we settle in to hear Matthew's version of the Jesus story for much of the rest of the liturgical year.

In the reading we hear today, maybe it is fitting that Jesus says to his disciples three times some variation of "fear not" or "do not be afraid." The disciples (and that includes us) are to be fearless. The basis of this fearlessness is the Father, who knows all—even the most seemingly insignificant things that we do not know (e.g., the hairs on our head). The Father even knows each and every sparrow. We, each human being, is worth more than two sparrows (which themselves were worth only a small coin in antiquity). So the disciples can rest assured: they can be fearless in facing the world, as they are worth a great deal in the sight of God.

With this assurance, with this fearlessness, the disciples are emboldened to acknowledge Jesus and preach him to the ends of the earth (Matt 28:19-20). The danger is for those who know Jesus but choose not to acknowledge him before others. As far as they are concerned, Jesus will not acknowledge them before the Father.

Living the Paschal Mystery

Fearlessness ought to be a mark of Christian discipleship. It is a quality that motivated Jesus throughout his earthly ministry and allowed him to face threats and violence. Fearlessness accompanied him even as he went to his death. Not many of us will be called to make the ultimate sacrifice required for being a disciple of Jesus, though this does happen in parts of the world even today. Instead, our own attitude of fearlessness can manifest itself in caring for those in need and for those on the margins of society. When we overcome our own prejudices and implicit biases, we are dying to ourselves and allowing the spirit of Christ to rise up within us. So let us live as disciples of Jesus, facing the world in a fearless manner, knowing that we are worth a great deal in the sight of our loving God.



GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

cf. John 15:26b, 27a

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
The Spirit of truth will testify to me,
says the Lord;
and you also will testify.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Matt 10:26-33; L94A

Jesus said to the Twelve:

"Fear no one.

**Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed,
nor secret that will not be known.**

What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light;

what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops.

And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy

both soul and body in Gehenna.

Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin?

Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father's knowledge.

Even all the hairs of your head are counted.

So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Everyone who acknowledges me before others

I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father.

But whoever denies me before others,

I will deny before my heavenly Father."

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: “Even all the hairs of your head are counted.”

To the point: At the beginning of the tenth chapter of Matthew (from which today’s gospel is taken), the twelve apostles are named and then sent out on mission by Jesus. After outlining what they should take (and not take) for the journey, he warns them of the dangers of their quest: “Behold, I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves” (10:16; NABRE). It is in this context, after delineating a series of possible persecutions they will undergo (beatings in the synagogues and general hatred from all corners), that Jesus tells them, “Fear no one” and “Do not be afraid.” Even if they face death itself, God is with them.

Connecting the Gospel

to the first reading: Jeremiah is a prophet who faced his fair share of persecutions, including being imprisoned in a dungeon and then thrown into a muddy cistern (Jeremiah 38:6). The whisperings of denunciation by Jeremiah’s foes are understandable, as Jeremiah was preaching a very unpopular message that the kingdom of Judah should capitulate to the attacking Babylonians. We could say that Jeremiah’s outrage at his foes is understandable as well. It is not easy to be a prophet for God, and certainly not when the intended audience for God’s prophecies are intent upon getting rid of the message by doing away with the messenger. Despite these hardships, Jeremiah is resolute in his decision to carry on. He has entrusted his cause to the Lord; he cannot fail.

to experience: Throughout the gospels Jesus makes it clear to his disciples that following him will entail hardships and maybe even persecution. And yet we have nothing to fear, for the God of life holds us in the palm of his hand and has counted every hair on our heads.

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: The psalmist sings, “[Z]eal for your house consumes me.” This zeal leads to shame and insults, and even to being cast out from family and friends. As with the first reading from Jeremiah, even though this psalm begins with despair it ends in hope, for despite current difficulties, “the Lord hears the poor, / and his own who are in bonds he spurns not.” For this reason, the psalmist will continue to praise the Lord. It is the same hope and joy that the apostles are called on to have in the gospel. Though they might face persecution, they are protected unto eternal life by the God of creation. They need not fear.

to psalmist preparation: Has there been a time in your life when you prayed with the conviction and desperation of today’s psalm asking, “Lord, in your great love, answer me”? What did this time teach you about faith?

PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING

In the first reading the prophet Jeremiah says to God, “[T]o you I have entrusted my cause.” Which cause(s) is near to your heart at this moment in time? How might you entrust it to God’s care?

In today’s psalm we hear, “For your sake I bear insult, / and shame covers my face.” Has there been a time in your life where you experienced insult or shame because of your faith? What helped you get through this time?

Jesus tells his disciples, “Fear no one,” and twice he urges them, “[D]o not be afraid.” How might you embrace this fearlessness in your life?

Jesus says to the twelve, “Even all the hairs on your head are counted.” How have you experienced this abundant love of God in your life?