

Homily for October 19, 2018

Fear. It is an emotion we all experience. I have wrestled with fearful thoughts for years. My father died unexpectedly when I was ten and I know that much of the fear I have dealt with over the years is related to thoughts and loved ones dying suddenly.

Jesus understands how fear can grip our hearts and in today's Gospel he addresses this. He says there is the right kind of fear and false kind of fear.

The right kind of fear should be viewed in relation to the enemy of our souls, the devil. He wants to tempt us in such a way so as to draw us away from trusting God. In our passage the way Jesus warns us to guard against such temptation is twofold.

There is the temptation to distrust God because of the corruption practised by those who are supposed to represent him. He talks about the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy in religion. The Greek word transliterated into English as 'hypocrite' was used to denote an actor, one who performed behind a mask. Thus the popular understanding came to be that of persons who pretended to be something that they were not.¹ When we see such hypocrisy it is easy to conclude that God cannot be trusted because those who are supposed to represent him are not trustworthy.

The other temptation is to distrust God when we experience those who oppose us because of who we are as Christians. Such opposition can in extreme cases result even in death. Listen again to Jesus' perspective on such opposition:

“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.”²

What can be more fearful than being put to death? Jesus answers by saying the fear of being sent to hell after death.

The word “hell” (v. 5) translates Gehenna, the name of a valley near Jerusalem with repulsive associations. In ancient times children were sacrificed here to the god Molech (Jer. 7:31–32), which may have prompted the conversion of the place into a desolate trash and garbage heap (2 Kings 23:10). It therefore easily qualified as a symbol for God's punishment. It is God, not man, who is to be feared finally because evil deeds will result in godly retribution.

So who are the ones who should fear God in this way? Those who abused the trust given to them, like the Pharisees. Or those entrusted with the care of children, but play at being parents rather than really being parents. Their evil ways cannot covertly go on indefinitely because “nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known”.

¹ Achtemeier, P. J., Harper & Row and Society of Biblical Literature. (1985). In [Harper's Bible dictionary](#) (1st ed., p. 414). San Francisco: Harper & Row.

² [The Holy Bible](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Lk 12:4). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Jesus is therefore warning us to be fearful about those temptations that can lure us away from trusting God. But then his tone changes by pointing out that God is to be trusted by making a simple comparison. Sparrows, are in the grand scheme of things inconsequential – after all, you can buy five for two pennies. However even they are not forgotten before God. Then he changes to talk about the hairs of our head. Even their number is known to God.

Do you hear what Jesus is saying to us here? In a world like this it is so easy to be afraid and distrust God because of corrupt religious leaders and people so opposed to Jesus they will kill his followers. But Jesus wants to speak into our hearts by saying that not everything is as it appears. The Father truly knows us and invites us to “Fear not; for we are of more value than many sparrows.”³

I know that it is a daily challenge for me to take Jesus at his word. I so easily have a fearful and distrusting heart that is prone to worry. May we who are troubled in heart remember Jesus’ tender words to us today and pray: “change my troubled heart into a trusting heart”

³ [*The Holy Bible*](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Lk 12:1–7). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.