

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time: The Fear of the Lord

The Babylonians were on the march. They had conquered the Assyrians, Tarsus and Damascus to the North had fallen, all of Mesopotamia had fallen, now Jerusalem was threatened. How could the tiny Kingdom of Judah withstand such a huge enemy? What should the King do? He looked to his counselors. They told him to consider treaties with their pagan neighbors. This would mean trusting in the pagans rather than trusting in God to deliver them from this evil. The King looked to God. There was a prophet in Jerusalem whom he respected. Jeremiah had the confidence of the king. The king saw him as a prophet who was not afraid to proclaim the truth. Jeremiah told the King that the Babylonians were agents of God about to punish the Jewish people for adopting pagan ways. The King needed to lead the people in trusting in God rather than in the pagans.

Jeremiah was hated by the King's counselors. Today's first reading, from one of the sections of the *Book of the Prophet Jeremiah* referred to as the *Confession of Jeremiah*, relates how Jeremiah's enemies were looking for ways by which they could denounce him to the King, condemn him, even have him killed. Jeremiah is tested. He decides to give witness to God and chance persecution from the politically powerful men gathered around the King. He decides to fear God rather than be afraid of men.

Fear God. That is a biblical concept that is often misunderstood. It does not mean that we should be afraid of God. It does not mean that we should not develop a personal relationship with the Lord. But it does mean that we should respect God, reverence God, and be infinitely more concerned with fulfilling the Law of God than with the way others might respond to our Christianity.

There are many times that we fear what others are saying or thinking about us. We are afraid that the next door neighbors will think that we are not good parents if we don't have our children involved in as many activities as their children are involved. We are afraid that our children will want to know why they don't have all the stuff their friends have. We are afraid that our parents or relatives will see us as a disappointment if we haven't met their financial standards for success. We are afraid of being a disappointment to ourselves if we have achieved our own expectations.

In the Gospel reading for this Sunday Jesus says, "Do not let others intimidate you." He tells us to keep our priorities straight. He tells us that we shouldn't even be afraid of people who could kill us when we stand for his truth. "Do not fear those who deprive the body of life but cannot destroy the soul." In one of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament Jesus says, "Are not two sparrows sold for next to nothing? Yet not a single sparrow falls to the ground without your Father's consent. As for you, every hair of your head has been counted; so do not be afraid of anything. You are worth more than an entire flock of sparrows."

The Lord also says in that passage, "Fear Him who can throw body and soul into Gehenna."

This is not a popular concept in our society. We have emphasized God's

compassion and mercy, and this is good. But we tend to refuse to acknowledge his justice. In our minds we have transformed God into a sort of Barney figure that will not respond to our rejection of his life and laws. So a man commits adultery, leaves his wife and children, and then says, "God understands." Well maybe the "Barney God" of his imagination might forgive, but the real God who was present when marriage vows were made and who sees the turmoil a selfish man has thrust upon a good wife and beautiful children, his family, maybe the Just God has to consider justice as well as mercy. If we sin but refuse to acknowledge our sins and seek forgiveness, we are, in effect, denigrating God.

This reminds me of the old movie, *Dead Man Walking*, with Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. That was the true story about a nun, Sr. Helen Prejean, ministering to a man on death row, Matthew Poncelet. The climax of the movie came when the man refused to acknowledge his crime, but said instead, "I know God loves me and forgives me." Sister responded, something to the effect, "You cannot presume God's mercy when you refuse to acknowledge your sinfulness and seek the forgiveness both of God and of the families of the two young people you killed." He feared death, but he did not fear God. His salvation could only result from his fear of the Lord. In the movie he acknowledged his sinfulness immediately before his death and gave himself over to God's mercy.

If we live with a reverence and respect for the Lord, the biblical Fear of the Lord, then we do not have to be afraid of anything.

If we live with a reverence and respect for the Lord, in the biblical Fear of the Lord, then all those concerns of ours that the evening news delights in frightening us with diminish. Will the world end this year? Maybe, probably not. But it does not matter as long as we are united to God. Will World War III erupt when we least expect? Maybe, probably not. But it does not matter as long as we are united to God. Will Hurricane Tutsi-Frutsi devastate the west coast of Florida destroying our homes and futures? Maybe, probably not. But it does not matter as long as we are united to God. Will people attack us for being Christian? Will we be disparaged because we are against abortion, against capital punishment, against warfare? We probably will be, but it does not matter as long as we are united to God.

We have nothing to fear as long as we fear the Lord.

*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.*