

12th Sunday of the Year A

'Do not be afraid.'

In today's Gospel Jesus is instructing his disciples before he sends them out of a mission. He says to them. 'Do not be afraid. ... What you hear in whispers, proclaim from the house-tops.' And, knowing they will face opposition, he says, 'do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.'

So, he says to them not once, but twice, 'do not be afraid'. Someone has written that the exhortation 'do not be afraid' occurs 365 times in the Bible. The phrase is God's 'good morning' to us each day of the year.

Of course, these words, 'do not be afraid' need to be properly understood. Fear is in fact a healthy, God-given emotion, very important for self-preservation. People who have no fear can engage in reckless behaviours, endangering both themselves and others.

What we need to avoid is excessive fear, the fear that paralyses and prevents us from moving forward courageously. On occasions our fear needs to be moderated by our faith in God and the needs of others for our help.

The Gospels were written in the first century, at a time when Christians faced great persecution. Indeed, many were suffering martyrdom, and many lived in fear for their lives. Jesus assures them, and us also, that God, who has counted every hair on our head, and will always watch over us and protect that most essential, precious part of ourselves – our soul.

Here in Australia we don't have to worry too much about the body: it is very unlikely that we will be killed for being Christians, and if we get sick, we have the very best medical care to help us get well. But we can note a paradox here: in societies like ours where the body is well cared for, the soul (the human spirit), can be neglected; in societies undergoing persecution, peoples' bodies are very vulnerable, but their souls remain strong.

What we each need to do is to consciously tend the soul, to care for it, to nourish it – through prayer, spiritual reading, participation in the Eucharist, taking time to walk, to reflect, to contemplate, to read, to enjoy music, to be with family and friends, to be sensitive to the needs of the less fortunate, to

ensure that in our lives there is a balance between work and rest. We must do all this consciously, by choice, otherwise it will not happen.

More than forty years ago there was a musical called Godspell that contained a beautiful prayer. It said simply:

*Dear Lord,
three things I pray:
to see Thee more clearly,
love Thee more dearly,
follow Thee more nearly,
day by day.*

If seeing, loving and following God, and caring for others, are our priorities each day, we can be sure that, whatever happens to the body, our souls will be strong. Jesus will proudly declare himself for us in the presence of our heavenly Father.

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