

I don't expect you were counting, but do you know how many times Jesus told his disciples not to be afraid in the gospel we have just heard? It was four times. The other thing that most of us probably don't know is that of all the commands that Jesus gives throughout his ministry, the command not to be afraid is the one that occurs most often. We might wonder why this is the case. I think it has to do with two things. First, not being afraid will only come from a deep sense of trust and security. And as Jesus points out, that security is God. So, to heed this command means knowing God. The second is that fear arises when events or people overwhelm someone causing them to lose confidence and to lose the feeling of security. This is what is going on in the words that Jesus speaks to his disciples today. Their situation, of course, is very different from ours, but there are still lessons for us.

Jesus' words today form part of a longer teaching to his disciples about being missionary. We heard the beginning of this last week when he chose the apostles and sent them out to heal the sick, cast out devils, cure lepers and preach the good news. Today he tells them that as they go about these tasks, they will encounter people who will oppose them. The opposition they will encounter will range from being condemned publicly, to being falsely accused by those who are challenged by their words and actions, or ultimately to being falsely charged with crimes and put to death.

We know from history that these things did happen in the early church. We also know that down through the ages, missionaries have often suffered and some have died for being witnesses to the faith. We might think of St Peter Chanel who went from France as a missionary to the Pacific and who ended up being martyred. But we could equally think of St Mary Mackillop who faced a lot of opposition to her project of educating poor children and establishing a religious community to undertake that work and other works among poor people. When we think of people like Peter Chanel and Mary Mackillop, we might wonder why they remained so strong in the face of opposition and why they persevered. I think the answer is found in today's gospel. They listened to Jesus' words and took them to heart. They heard his message, "Do not be afraid".

Jesus used two images to make his point. The first was the image of a sparrow. The sparrow is a very small bird. If you were relying on a sparrow for your food, you would not be getting

much food. In fact, they were so insignificant that Jesus reminds the disciples that you could buy two of them for just a penny. In other words, they weren't worth much. Yet even the sparrows are known by God. Not one of them falls to the ground without God knowing. In other words, if God knows even the smallest and most insignificant bird, how much more will God keep an eye on you – because you are worth more than hundreds of sparrows.

The second image Jesus uses is the hairs on your head. He tells the disciples that God even knows the number of hairs on their head. Both these images tell us that God knows us thoroughly. And as some spiritual writers have said, God knows us better than we probably know ourselves. Jesus' message is about the dignity and worth of each person in the eyes of God. This is why they don't need to be afraid. So, not being afraid is based on the certainty that we are in God's care.

I think it is important to be clear what Jesus is saying here. To not be afraid does not mean that there won't be situations that will make us feel afraid. It doesn't mean that we should not do our part to keep out of harm's way. In the life of Christian discipleship, we may from time to time be faced with decisions about what to do or what to say. This requires discernment about what God is asking in that situation. I think that both Peter Chanel and Mary Mackillop are once again examples for us. They faced situations where they had to discern the right thing to say or the right thing to do. I am sure they also had to face their own fears and doubts – sometimes doubts about God and sometimes doubts about themselves. In the end, they did what they did because they had a deep sense of God's care for them.

In our time, we are not faced with the sort of challenges to being missionary disciples that Peter Chanel or Mary Mackillop faced. But we are invited by Jesus to not be afraid when it comes to our own living of the gospel in fidelity to the teaching of Jesus. In our day, fear can come as much from self-doubt as from external sources. The command of Jesus still stands: Do not be afraid. This is an invitation to a way of life, and it has its roots in our knowledge that we are worth more than many sparrows, and from our experience of being loved by God and given life beyond our imagining. That's why Jesus says so often, "Do not be afraid".