

Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 22, 2020

“Even though I walk in the dark valley I fear no evil; for you are at my side with your rod and your staff that give me courage.” (Psalm 23)

On October 22, 1978 a newly elected Pope, St. John Paul II, in his inaugural homily to the faithful gathered in Saint Peter’s Square, spoke these words: “Brothers and sisters, do not be afraid to welcome Christ and accept his power.” These three words, “Be Not Afraid,” could be heard, often be repeated, during his pontificate. As the crowds in attendance listened and reflected upon the words “Be Not Afraid,” so we, for our part, must hear and reflect upon these words again.

Let us begin by calling to mind that it was Our Lord Jesus Christ who first spoke the words, “Be Not Afraid,” to his little band of followers. One could rightly question why Jesus felt the need to repeat these words to both His disciples and us. What is it that we are afraid of? Are we afraid of a transcendent God, so far removed from our daily lives, our joys and worries, that He no longer cares? Are we afraid of a God who, through His Divine Justice, wills to punish our transgressions? Could this be the reason why there are so very many books, sermons, and movies dedicated to the end of the world? Could this also be the reason why so many stress His Mercy, His Love, to the point that it has become a somewhat misunderstood blanket of sorts, loosely covering our faults lest we face them? Rather, could not the words “Be Not Afraid” have been said by Our Lord to reassure us of His Presence as we “walk through the dark valley” of the unknown? To find an answer to these questions, we must begin by first asking ourselves what it is that we fear the most.

As we walk through “the dark valley,” we are confronted by real objects which evoke genuine fear. These may be snakes or spiders or clowns or a multitude of other things which could paralyze our ability to move or react. We are forced to face the fear of the “unknown possibilities.” Could I, or someone I love, possibly become exposed to the COVID-19 virus? If this happens, then what will I do? Recently, many of us have either heard or asked questions similar to these: “How bad will it get, how will I support myself or my family if I am quarantined for an extended period of time, do I have enough food, water, or supplies (toilet paper excluded), and so many others, too many to list.”

As real, or imagined, as these fears are, they rather shrink away when we are waylaid by one universal truth we cannot escape from - ourselves. It is our frail, inadequate, mortal selves that we fear the most. Am I a good person, have I lived a good life, how will I be remembered, these are questions no person has ever been able to avoid. How do we come to answer them? Some have sought the answer to these questions through the glories of human accomplishment. We have constructed monuments, dedicated holidays, awarded prizes commemorating humanity’s endeavors. Yet in the end, monuments crumble, holidays lose their meanings, and prizes tarnish. Our true answer can only be found in a life lived in union with God. A life lived with Hope. A Hope based upon His words assuring us that He will remain us always, no matter where we may find ourselves in “the dark valley.” An assurance of His Presence found in our tabernacles scattered throughout this world. Allow me to conclude with the words of Pope St. John Paul II as he spoke to the world the day after his elevation: “These totally unforeseen events, happening in so brief a time, and the inadequacy with which we can respond . . . impel us to turn to the Lord and to trust completely to him.” (October 17, 1978)