

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 25, 2023
Year of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Ark of the New Covenant

“Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.” (Philippians 2: 12)

I would hazard to guess we have all had some brush with fear during our lifetime. It’s pretty hard for humans to get through life without being afraid of someone or something. That seems to be a fact of life for us sinners, which includes all of us. But, interestingly enough, in this gospel reading, Christ tells His apostles to be unafraid; to have no fear! Furthermore, He gives them the prescription to overcome fear. His words are also meant for us today. He lets them and us know their value to our loving God. He explains that their earthly possessions, life and status in this world are meaningless. Wealth, position, influence, health, reputation, all things of this world have no significance in the big picture – eternity with God.

So, what is Christ’s message to his apostles and us in this gospel passage? It’s a simple point; there is no reason for us to be afraid of anyone or anything in this world. However, we tend to complicate Christ’s message with stipulations.

When I first thought about presenting this gospel to you in the form of a homily, I initially considered the writings of a well known Danish philosopher from the 19th century, Soren Kierkegaard. He wrote a book entitled “Fear and Trembling.” The title is a metaphor for the physical manifestation of fear. This is a bit of philosophy drawn from the Old Testament about Abraham, his wife Sarah, and their son Isaac. I’m sure most of you are familiar with this story. Elderly Abraham and his wife pray for a son and God grants them this request with the birth of their son, Isaac. However, years later, God instructs Abraham to offer up his precious son as a sacrifice. Abraham was about to murder his son with a knife when he was stopped by God. Abraham was not going to sacrifice Isaac because he was afraid of God. In fact, contrary to that, he was going to obey God because he trusted God completely. His faith was absolute and total. He understood his absolute duty to God above all man-made laws, ethical obligations, and any earthly possessions. I believe this partially explains the message Jesus was directing to His apostles and us.

Perhaps Bishop Barron offered a more modern and superior explanation of Christ’s message regarding who or what we should fear. He related the story of Sir Thomas More and King Henry VIII and referenced the movie version (A Man for All Seasons) of the tale. It is a story taken from life in the 16th century. Many of you may recall, from English history or the film, that Sir Thomas More was a secretary and personal advisor to the king. He was Lord Chancellor of England from 1529 to 1532. Sir Thomas More refused to assist the king in seeking an annulment of the king’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Not having the support of Sir Thomas More or the blessings of the Pope, King Henry VIII by royal decree made himself the supreme head of the Church of England. The king then started exerting increasing pressure, in various ways, on Sir Thomas More. Over time, the king took away his wealth, his position, his reputation, and every close person (family and friends). Finally, the king had him thrown into the Tower of London like a criminal. At every turn, every step, Sir Thomas More refused to cooperate, refused to compromise his faith. Sir Thomas More knew that the King’s second marriage was illegitimate and against the teachings of the Church. In the end, Sir Thomas More was executed. However, he was not afraid of King Henry VIII. The king could perhaps intimidate all others in his realm, but, not Sir Thomas More. Bishop Barron said it so succinctly, “He

had that holy fear that the Bible speaks of often: the fear of the Lord. There was something he feared losing - and that was intimacy and friendship with God."

Bishop Barron, in his analysis, was close to my thoughts, but expressed a little differently. I felt it was more faith and love of God, rather than some version of fear, which gave Abraham and Sir Thomas More the strength to follow their duty to God. I always recall what Mother Teresa instructed us. She truly knew the truth and the path when she advised, "Let nothing come between you and Jesus." In other words, let nothing come between you and God's love. Peace be with you.