

19th Sunday Ordinary Time Year "A"

August 9-10, 2014

Readings: 1 Kings 19: 9a, 11-13; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14: 22-33

At once Jesus spoke to them, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." These words conjure up all sorts of images in people's minds. Of what or of whom are we afraid and why? How should we deal with fear in our lives? Sometimes the best lessons come from paying attention to the experience of those who have undergone significant hardship, yet have emerged stronger in faith than ever.

But right now, as we speak, entire villages and cities are in terror following the brutal attacks of Islamist militants ravaging Iraq and Syria. And this fear is absolutely justified. The newly named Islamic State jihadist group now controls 30% of Syria and over 40% of Iraq. "The churches are occupied, their crosses were taken down," said Chaldean Catholic Patriarch Louis Sako, to which the majority of Iraq's Christians belong. "The government is unable to defend our people, as is the Kurdistan government. They need to work together, receive international support and modern military equipment." Sadly, Kurdish Iraqi soldiers fled in fear.

"It's a catastrophe, a tragic situation," said Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Yousif Thomas of Kirkuk. "Tens of thousands of terrified people are being displaced as we speak, it cannot be described." In addition to Christians, the Islamic State has also persecuted the Yazidi, who adhere to an ancient religion related to Zoroastrianism. Tens of thousands of Yazidi fled to the Sinjar Mountain ridge, where they are trapped, dependent upon supplies dropped from U.S. planes. Believe me, they are very much afraid, and so would you. The Holy Father weighed in once again following the latest events. He is asking "that the whole Church and all the faithful raise up with one voice a ceaseless prayer, imploring the Holy Spirit to send the gift of peace."

Through his spokesman, Fr. Lombardi, the Holy Father:

“...urgently calls on the international community to protect all those affected or threatened by the violence, and to guarantee all necessary assistance – especially the most urgently needed aid – to the great multitude of people who have been driven from their homes, whose fate depends entirely on the solidarity of others.”

It is not sufficient to simply say, “Do not be afraid,” if we are unwilling to help. The virtue of justice demands that we stand up for the defenseless, while at the same time realizing that it is impossible to address every situation of injustice in the world. But what we see happening is nothing short of genocide, right now, in the land of Mesopotamia, land of the Tigris and Euphrates, one of the most ancient civilizations of the world. The Chaldean Patriarch reports that ancient documents and manuscripts are being burned. We also know that these brutal militants have videotaped their atrocities that include crimes against innocent women and children.

We are told in our first reading that the young Elijah hid his face in his cloak, not possibly able to comprehend what the Lord would ask from him. Yet he obeyed, overcame fear and became one of the greatest prophets in the entire Bible. Our fears can paralyze us, fears about our work or the economy, about family life, about the lives of your children, about the state of the world or Church.

“Lord, save me,” cried out a frightened Saint Peter. I would not be truthful if I said that this is an easy passage for me either. I cannot stand here and say that I have not been spiritually fearful at any time. I have indeed been afraid, and in retrospect often regret that my faith was so weak in trial, not trusting that God would provide. Catholic theology teaches us that it is not all about God providing, but that we must also contribute, as St. Paul teaches by “working out our own salvation in fear and trembling.” (Phil 2:12)

In our second reading from Romans, Saint Paul readily acknowledged his own “great sorrow and constant anguish in my heart.” This did not show a lack of faith, but rather the fragility of the human condition and our need to seek strength from above.

This religious and humanitarian crisis in Iraq may be half a world away, but the threat is real and our response cannot be measured in terms of strong statements of support. The world of nations, and civilized humanity cannot idly stand by and allow genocide. I applaud the Maronite Catholic Patriarch of Lebanon who has called on moderate Muslim leaders in his own nation to stand with him to condemn these atrocities. Islam teaches that there is no compulsion in religion, and yet that is what is happening- and the silence is deadly.

But in all this, the words of Scripture also serve to comfort us. The hand of the Lord is there, reaching out to grasp us, lest we sink in the water. Just as Peter, we may question and doubt, but this doubt must not become persistent. Christ can shoulder our fears; cast them off into the waters of His love and grace. God longs for this peace in each of us. Let us seek this peace by casting aside our fears, entrusting our entire lives to the Good Lord. I close with this prayer from the head of the Chaldean Catholics in Iraq, Patriarch Sako:

Lord,
The plight of our country
is deep and the suffering of Christians
is severe and frightening.
Therefore, we ask you Lord
to spare our lives, and to grant us patience,
and courage to continue our witness of Christian values
with trust and hope.
Lord, peace is the foundation of life;
Grant us the peace and stability that will enable us
to live with each other without fear and anxiety, and with dignity and joy.
Glory be to you forever.