

homily. "Fear". Mark 10:46-52. Deacon Jay Dallas, St Teresa's. Oct 28-29, 2006

In this story about Jesus healing the blind man named Bartimeus, there is a line that jumps out at me. It is the point that the entire miracle hinges on - the fate of Bartimeus and his blindness depends on his response to this...

It is when someone in the crowd, moved prophetically by the Spirit of God, tells Bartimeus to "Take courage, get up. Jesus is calling you".

That invitation and command is repeated very often in the scriptures - both Old and New Testament. God's word to "fear not", "take courage", "Don't be afraid" is repeated hundreds of times in the Bible - so often that it is fair to say that God's command to confront and overcome our fears is one of the central themes of all the scriptural Revelation.

Fear - that terrible adversary of human freedom.

In this discussion, I am not talking about fear in the sense of the "butterflies" we get before an athletic event or some performance. That is probably a helpful thing - a physiological response that quickens our senses and attention.

Nor am I talking about that sense of alarm and nervous energy we get in the face of danger - what scientists call the "Fight or Flight" response. Again, that is a good thing that gives us extra energy to either run away or to defend ourselves in the face of potential harm.

I'm talking about the kind of fear that grips the soul - that deep, dark dread that sinks in to our minds and hearts to the point that it practically controls us - when we have trouble thinking clearly about anything else.

I think we all are tempted to fear at times - when we are waiting for medical test results for ourselves or someone we love - or when we are threatened by legal trouble, marital trouble, financial trouble, career troubles or threats to our physical safety. We fear being alone, of being abandoned and being embarrassed. We fear becoming weak and of being rejected. We fear death. We fear the devil.

Maybe we are overcome with the guilt of our own past sins and begin to fear and doubt whether we can ever get out from under the cursed consequences of all the mistakes we've made?

When it lingers and takes root, fear becomes a terrible sickness in the human soul. It makes us question our most fundamental decisions - "Am I OK? Is God real? Does he really love me? Has he forgotten about me? Does he care?"

Fear can destroy our self-image. It can ruin our confidence and shake our faith to the breaking point. It makes us physically sick - and it damages our ability to relate in a healthy way with other people and to make good decisions any more. We become pessimists - expecting disaster at every turn - with every phone call - with every bit of news.

In its most extreme levels, some people develop phobias - excessive and unreasonable fears (heights, crowds, public speaking, fire, small rooms, germs, etc) - fear that get so deep and strong that they absolutely dominate our lives - paralyze us - put us in mental slavery.

Fears like this are based on lies - and they work in total opposition to what God wants for us. It is, in my opinion, totally diabolical - evil.... it is awful - **and God is never behind it.**

Resisting the lies and overcoming the fears that would rob us of the peace and freedom God wants for us is the primordial struggle that every human being in every age has had to fight. It is a tool of the devil - and God means to give us the means to win against it.

That's where Jesus comes in

You see, no human is so psychologically healthy or spiritually strong in themselves to win this battle. On our own, we lose. God know this - He knows we need His help win - help that we call "grace" (His Power). And Jesus is the "Grace-Giver" (praise God!). Jesus came to make the grace of God available to us through faith in Him - grace that makes us overcomers rather than constantly overcome - grace to stand against the doubts and fears that seek to suck the life out of us by relying on Him rather than going it on our own.

The struggle for us is in choosing to accept the grace - by believing what God says about us rather than believing the lies that lead to fear - to believe HIM as Truth no matter what the circumstances or our weak human nature seem to say ..... that is FAITH.

True faith is not demure and timid. It cannot afford to always be shy. Sometimes, that faith takes root in action - in boldness - even in outrageous action like the kind Bartimeus displayed for us in the gospel today. He is a real hero, I think. Here was a man who was blind and poor - surely the butt of taunts and jokes... a man easily used and abused by anyone cruel enough to target him. He was surely tempted to think "Why me?" Why has God allowed me to be blind?' "Why doesn't God love ME and bless me like all these sighted people around me?"

But here - this day in the presence of Jesus, he decided to be bold in faith. He cried out -and the more people told him to shut up - the louder he got. He would not be silenced - not this time. He demonstrated his hope in God and his faith in Christ in a very active way and ...you know the rest of the story. He was rewarded with an encounter with the Messiah and the living God that none of the hundreds of sighted people in the crowd had that day. He was cured - and Jesus said, "Your FAITH has saved you".

Faith in the love of God and Jesus, the Grace-giver is STILL the antidote to fear. This doesn't mean our lives will be trouble-free. But it does mean that fear of enemies and failure and future disappointments need not paralyze us and rob us of our joy - for we know and trust the One who controls all these events and all the future - and we know He will work it all out for our good in His good time and His good way if we will let Him. That makes it OK, no matter what.

If you are troubled by fears today, I beg you to give it to the Lord Jesus when you come to Communion. Give it to the One who died to set you and I free of fear on the cross. And, when you get home, read the scriptures, especially those psalms which disclose His heart towards us - like:

"God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. So we will fear not, even if earthquakes come and mountains crumble into the sea (PS 46:1-5)

"The Lord is my light and my salvation - so why should I be afraid? The Lord protects me from danger - so why should I tremble? When evil people come to destroy me, when my enemies and foes attack me, THEY will stumble and fall. Though a mighty army surrounds me, my heart will know no fear. Even if they attack me, I remain confident" (Ps 27:1-3)

"Even when I walk through the dark valley of death, I will not be afraid, for you are close to me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me" (Ps 23: 4)

These are indelible truths. These are the things that last. These are the Resurrection realities that will stand clear and shine when all the dust and commotion of our lives is finally settled. Focus on that. Focus on Christ. Shout out to Him and step out of your fear to Him. Give it to Jesus Christ who loves you and died for you.

## "Eternal Father, Strong to Save"

The waves of fear reach heavenward,  
Stretch uttermost, brush God's abode,  
Then fall, Hands empty, fingers foiled,  
    In fury over us explode,  
And swamp the fragile boat we built  
    Of faith too flimsy for the load.

O Christ, we perish in this storm!  
    Awaken to your people's plea,  
Walk on these waters where we gasp  
    And flounder in the roiling sea.  
Catch hold of hands that flail in prayer,  
    To you before whom tempests flee!

Come to our aid, make haste to save,  
Across these crashing waves draw near,  
    For we are lost without your help:  
    We cry, O great Redeemer, hear!  
Make strong once more our failing faith,  
    With perfect love cast out our fear!