

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Jeremiah 20:10-13
<i>Response</i>	Lord, in your great love, answer me.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 69:8-10, 14, 17, 33-35
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 5:12-15
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The Spirit of truth will testify to me, says the Lord; and you also will testify.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 10:26-33

With the 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time, we take up a very important theme in the Gospel of Matthew, and that is the theme of persecution and testimony — bearing witness to Christ even in the face of opposition, persecution and death itself, martyrdom itself. So the readings for this Sunday are actually taken from one of the five discourses in the Gospel of Matthew. You might recall, if you watched the introduction video on the Gospel of Matthew, I talked about how Matthew's Gospel has five major speeches or five major discourses of Jesus in the Gospel. You have the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 and then the second major discourse is what's known as the missionary discourse, or the discipleship discourse, where Jesus sends the apostles out on mission and he instructs them about what it takes to be one of his disciples and to be a missionary for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. So in this Sunday we are getting a passage from that discourse that is specifically focused on persecution and martyrdom. So let's read the Gospel together as is my custom. We will begin with the Gospel, read it, ask a few questions, and then try to answer the questions in light of the first century Jewish context, but also the Old Testament readings for the day. So the reading for today is from Matthew 10:26-33, and it says this:

So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?

And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. So every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.¹

What are we to make of these words? They are very interesting, they are very challenging words of Jesus. A few things, first, obviously, the disciples are afraid. Jesus, up to this point, has been traveling around with them. He's been the one preaching and teaching, and now he's going to send them out two by two to preach and teach the kingdom on their own, and obviously they are worried, they are afraid, they have trepidation about going out on that first mission. So one of Jesus's exhortations to them is "don't be afraid." So that is the first point. The second point is notice the emphasis on the fact that they are not just afraid of going on mission, but they are particularly afraid of martyrdom. So why does Jesus say that they shouldn't fear death? Isn't that a normal, rational thing to be afraid, not just of death, but of being killed for the sake of the Gospel? What does that mean and why is he saying that? A third question here we want to ask is when Jesus says "fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell," what is he talking about? Is he telling the disciples to fear God or is he telling them to fear Satan? Who is the referent there? And then finally, what is Jesus's statement about the sparrows and the penny and acknowledging him before the Father in heaven, what is he trying to teach the disciples exactly about the nature of God when he makes that comparison? So let's walk through each one of those together.

First and foremost, Jesus' exhortation here "have no fear" is in itself challenging. As you know if you have lived in this world for even a few years, you will recognize really quickly that it is a dangerous place. Life is very fragile, it could be brought to an end very quickly. There are untold number of evils in the world, dangers in the world, and so it is easy and it's natural for a human being to be afraid. Why does he tell them to "have no fear"? Well if you put the verse in

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

context, you can't see this in the lectionary, but right before this in Matthew's Gospel, in Matthew 10:24-25, the context was Jesus telling the disciples that a slave is not greater than his master, and so that if people said that he was possessed by Be-el'zebul, they are not going to say good things about the disciples as well. In other words, the disciples can expect to be persecuted, they can expect to be maligned, and they can expect to be slandered just like Jesus was slandered. But what he is saying to them is "look, nothing that's covered will not be revealed, nothing hidden now will not become known." In other words, the truth will come out is what he is saying to them. So the truth about who Christ is is eventually going to be made known, and although he's operating in secret now, for example think about how he always told people "don't say anything" if they say he's the son of God, eventually it's going to come out. So they don't need to be afraid, in fact they're going to proclaim that truth from the housetops.

Now when they do that they're going to begin to encounter persecution just like Jesus, and so secondly he says "I don't want you to be afraid of those who can kill the body but can't kill the soul." So what is he getting at there? The Greek words here are *sōma*, which is basically the word for our body, and then *psychē* — we get the word psychology from that — which refers to the soul. It is the spiritual principle, the unifying and animating principle of the body that holds it together, the spiritual principle of the body. And so what he is saying is "don't be afraid of those who can kill your flesh, who can kill your mortal body, because they can't make you lose your soul. Instead you have to fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell", or as the Greek literally says, in Gehenna, which is the place of the damned.

So what Jesus is trying to get the disciples to do here is to have a rational, rather than an irrational, fear. Although most of us think it's rational to be afraid of death, and there's a sense in which it is, death is painful, it means an end to our natural life. What Jesus is saying is it is irrational to be more afraid of physical death, which is temporary and finite — however horrible it is, it only lasts for a time — than to be afraid of spiritual death, because spiritual death — being separated from God forever in Gehenna, the ancient Jewish name for hell, the realm of the dead — is something that's not finite, it's going to last forever, it's never going to end. So what he is telling the disciples is "as you go out to preach the Gospel, there's

simply no reason to be afraid, even if your life is in danger, because by preaching the Gospel you will save your soul, and the life of your soul will last forever, whereas the life of your body in this world is only for a time and for a season. So he's trying to turn the disciples way of looking at their lives, looking at reality, upside down and get them to see it the way God sees it, to see from God's perspective, to see it from an eternal perspective, to understand that although they live in this world, they were made for everlasting life, they were made for eternity.

Now some people might say “Wait! What is he talking about here when he says “fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell?” There's a debate about this. Some people will say that what he's saying is be afraid of Satan, because he can send you to hell through temptation and through fear and through committing sin. And that's a possible interpretation, some people say that because it is true that the devil, as 1 Peter says, he strives to cause people to stumble, he seeks the destruction of the righteous, the ruination of souls, he seeks their damnation. So what is he saying here? He is saying don't be afraid of humans, who can only kill your body, be afraid of God, who can cast your body and your soul into the fires of Gehenna where you will be separated from him forever, where you will experience a kind of spiritual destruction or spiritual death, which is hell itself. So if you look there, you can go back to the Old Testament in Isaiah 8:12-13 for example, is a good parallel with this. In Isaiah 8 it says “the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.” In other words, not that you should be afraid of God to where you can't have a relationship with him or you think he is a tyrant, what Isaiah is talking about here is a rational awe, a rational fear of offending God, a fear of sinning against the righteous and holy God, such that you would be separated from him, that you would break the covenant with him, that you would break your relationship with him. That's the fear of the Lord that the Old Testament says is actually the beginning of wisdom. The book of Proverbs says that multiple times and one of the Psalms says that as well, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Sometimes it puts people off, they think that means they have to “be afraid of God” in the way they might be afraid of someone who wants to harm them. That is not what the Bible means. The fear here is the fear that grows out of love. In other words, the fear of offending God because he is so good, because he is so holy, because he's a loving father, and also because sinning against him means being

separated from him forever in hell. That is what Jesus is getting at here, he is trying to teach the disciples to give up their earthly fear and to have a supernatural fear of sin. So if you had to choose between sinning against God and losing your soul forever or dying and gaining your life, the choice should be obvious. The choice to die for the sake of living forever makes much more sense than to choose to not die for the sake of purely natural life that is only going to last for a time anyway, which might be accompanied by eternal death through separation from God in the fires of Gehenna. That is what Jesus is getting at here.

Now notice this — Jesus is so good about this with the way teaches — as soon as he brings up the fear of God, he recognizes that people can take that in the wrong way, that they could concoct out of that an image of God that would make them terrified of him, as if God is out to get us. So no sooner has he said something about the fear of God that he also talks about the providence of God, and the fatherhood of God, and the care of God for us. So what does he say next? He says “are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s will [or apart from your Father’s will]. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.” So no sooner has he taught them to fear God that he also wants to make sure they understand that they are not just creatures of the Creator, they are the children of a loving father. What he is saying here is that God is not just omnipotent, he is also omniscient. He knows everything. He knows how many hairs are on your head. He knows when a single sparrow falls to the earth and dies, that doesn't happen apart from his knowledge and it doesn't happen apart from his will. So if you are of more value to God than many sparrows, and he knows everything that's happening to them, no matter what happens to you, he knows it in advance, he's aware of it, and it is part of his divine plan.

This is the great mystery here. I know for myself, if something bad happens or I experience a setback or suffering, one of things I can do is be shocked by it and start to have doubts and wonder “why did God let this happen to me? Where is he in my life? Has he abandoned me?” And the reality is that no matter what happens to us in our lives, no matter what happens to the apostles, whether they were persecuted or martyred or whatever it was, none of that is a surprise to God. It's not a surprise to God when hardship comes into your life, he knows about it from all eternity, just like he knew when that sparrow was going to give its last breath

and fall to the ground. It's all part of his divine plan and it doesn't mean that he cares for you any less. He is saying “you are of more value to God than many sparrows”, so there is no reason to be afraid. He's the omniscient God. He is also the providential father who has his plan of salvation laid out from all eternity. I have to say here as an aside, I think that this is one of the reasons why in our day and time — I don't know if you have noticed it — that so many people, especially in Western culture, are really afraid, they are anxious. There is a kind of climate of fear in our society.

Why is that the case? Well I think it's because as a secular outlook grows and people become more and more secular in their view of reality, what recedes into the background is the idea that not only that there is a God, but that God is all-powerful, that he is all-knowing and that everything that happens is part of his eternal plan of divine goodness, that is all working together to lead us ultimately to him and to eternal life. So once you give up the idea of a belief in God, you also give up the idea of a belief in providence and also of the omnipotence and omniscience of God, that he is all-powerful and all-knowing. So that means that you're on your own. And if you take that secular worldview to its logical end, how much more value is your life than that of a sparrow? What's the real difference between it? It's all just matter. There is no difference between the beasts and the human beings. We are just conglomerates of chemicals in the universe, if you have an atheistic, secularist outlook. And as that outlook spreads, people get more and more afraid because they feel like my life is not in my hands, I'm not in control, and once I die that is it, it's over. The curtain falls and that's the end of my existence. That's a fearful way to live and that's just not the truth as well. What Jesus is trying to get the apostles to see here is that there really isn't any reason to fear death if we actually live forever, and if God has come to the world to save us and give us salvation. There's no reason to be afraid of suffering and there's no reason to be afraid of death. In fact, it's all part of his divine plan for the salvation of the world. So Jesus's message to the apostles, as you look at the end of the Gospel here, is one of exhortation. He's telling them you have to be courageous in the face of death, because your soul depends on it. Look at what he says here in the last line, “whoever acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.” That again is a reference to the last judgment, it is a reference to eternal salvation. So Jesus knows here that one of the

greatest temptations that his disciples are going to face is that when they encounter persecution, they will be tempted to deny him. And what he says to them is don't give into that fear, because in doing that you will actually lose the eternal life in exchange for your natural life. If you deny me before others, I will deny you before the Father; but if you acknowledge me before others, I too will confess you before the Father, I'll acknowledge you and you will be saved.

So I think in our own day and time, as Christian martyrdom is spreading and becoming more and more a reality, that we are waking up in the West to realizing that this is not something that is from the past, that it used to be that Christians were martyred. Christians are being martyred today, right now there are places in the world where the Church is persecuted and suffering. We have to remember Jesus's message to the apostles, it is very important. We have to bear witness to him, even to death, and we have to not be afraid. We have to live lives of courage and not be afraid of dying. Natural death is nothing compared to the eternal death of being separated from God forever. So that is the Gospel for today.

What about the other readings here. Well if you go back to the Old Testament it is really fascinating. The first reading is from the book of Jeremiah 20, and it's all about Jeremiah the prophet, and the fact that he was being persecuted, he was being reviled, he was being slandered. Although the words aren't in the lectionary, it's a very famous passage and I encourage you to read it. It's in Jeremiah 20:7-8 and it sets the context. Basically, Jeremiah is a prophet, he is sent to the people of Israel at a time when Israel was very, very wicked. Jeremiah describes his vocation to be a prophet as the word of Lord coming to him and being like a fire shut up in his bones. In other words, he can't help himself. God chose, God called him and God sent him, and now he is going to bring this word of judgment to his own people, to the people of Israel. And guess how the people react? They don't like it, they don't want to hear Jeremiah's prophecies, that they are sinners, that they need to repent. They don't want to hear Jeremiah's prophecies that if they don't repent, Jerusalem and the Temple are going to be destroyed by the Babylonians. So they respond to Jeremiah by rejecting him, and in the context of that rejection Jeremiah says this in Jeremiah 20:10-11:

For I hear many whispering.
Terror is on every side!

"Denounce him! Let us denounce him!"
say all my familiar friends,
watching for my fall.
"Perhaps he will be deceived,
then we can overcome him,
and take our revenge on him."
But the LORD is with me as a dread warrior;
therefore my persecutors will stumble,
they will not overcome me.
They will be greatly shamed,
for they will not succeed.
Their eternal dishonor
will never be forgotten.
O LORD of hosts, who triest the righteous,
who seest the heart and the mind,
let me see thy vengeance upon them,
for to thee have I committed my cause.
Sing to the LORD;
praise the LORD!
For he has delivered the life of the needy
from the hand of evildoers.

So why is the Church putting that before us? Because this is Jeremiah's cry to the Lord. It's a cry for justice, but it is also cry for vindication. He's crying out against his enemies, "Lord deliver me from them, vindicate me and remember that you are the God who delivers the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers." So the whole context here is that of persecution. So the persecution of God's people is not something that begins in the New Testament, it goes back to the Old Testament. And really Jeremiah is almost a kind of a type of Christ. He's a Jewish prophet sent to the people that the people reject, and when they reject him, ultimately it is going to lead to the destruction of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. And in the midst of that, he's totally abandoned by everyone. Even his friends leave them behind. And that's what the apostles are going to experience as well. They are going to be betrayed by friends, they are going to be betrayed by other disciples, and eventually, as you know if you study the history of the Church, most of them, almost all of them, will end up martyrs themselves. So the Church here

on this 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time is exhorting us to remember that as Christians we have to bear witness even in the face of rejection, even in the face of persecution, and even unto death.

And so the Responsorial Psalm that bridges the gap between the Old Testament and the New Testament here is one of the psalms, it is a Psalm that's all about persecution. It's one of these lament Psalms where the psalmist is talking about the fact that he's been abandoned and persecuted and that he's under duress from his enemies. So there are a number of lines here that we could read. The refrain for the day is:

Lord, in your great love, answer me.

I will just read a couple lines from Psalm 69:6, it says:

Let not those who hope in thee be put to shame through me,
O Lord GOD of hosts;
let not those who seek thee be brought to dishonor through me,
O God of Israel.
For it is for thy sake that I have borne reproach,
that shame has covered my face.
I have become a stranger to my brethren,
an alien to my mother's sons.
For zeal for thy house has consumed me,
and the insults of those who insult thee have fallen on me.

If you think about this for a second, “zeal for thy house has consumed me,” that verse from the Psalms can be applied to Jesus when he goes into the temple and he overturns the tables of the money changers and begins to experience the rejection of his fellow Jews and of the Jewish leadership in particular. “Zeal for your house has consumed me” just like it consumed the psalmist. And that's what happens when a prophet or a king like David, or whoever it is, when they are righteous and zealous for the Lord, those who are living in sin, those who are rejecting the Lord, who are insulting and blaspheming against him, ultimately they're going to take that rejection of God and focus it on the rejection of his prophets, focus it on the rejection of his righteous men or, in the case of his disciples, focus it on the

rejection of the disciples, which will eventually lead to their martyrdom. The Psalm then goes on to pray for deliverance. The prayer of the persecuted is always “Lord deliver us...deliver the needy, deliver the poor, deliver the persecuted, deliver those who are being put to death by evildoers.” So that is the Psalm here.

Now I am going to skip over the second reading. You recall that in Ordinary Time the second readings from Paul are on a completely different track. It's from Romans 5 this year, but it doesn't have any correlation with the first reading and the Gospel, which are really focused on this theme of bearing witness to Christ and not being afraid of death. So in closing then, I would just like to end with a section from the Catechism where the Catechism gives us a sobering reflection on the reality of persecution and on the need to bear witness even in the face of it. So in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1816, we read these words specifically about Matthew 10 and the Gospel for today:

The disciple of Christ must not only keep the faith and live on it, but also profess it, confidently bear witness to it, and spread it: "All however must be prepared to confess Christ before men and to follow him along the way of the Cross, amidst the persecutions which the Church never lacks." Service of and witness to the faith are necessary for salvation: "So every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven."

I don't know about you but when I read those words for the first time, that really struck me. I don't think most of us today talk about the fact that bearing witness to the faith is necessary for salvation. But that is the teaching of the Church here because that is the teaching of Christ in the Gospel. So when it comes to being a Christian, we don't have a choice about whether to bear witness or not to bear witness, we have an obligation to bear witness to Christ, even if it means being persecuted, even if it means being rejected, and even if it means being put to death; because bearing witness to the faith is necessary for salvation. So I just want to leave that thought with you as something to ponder and pray about, because whether any individual one of us is ever going to face physical martyrdom for the sake of the faith, even to bear witness to Christ in our families, amongst our friends, in a growing secular context, you're going to have to die to yourself, you

are going to have to die to your desire to be loved, your desire to be liked, your desire to have friends, your desire to get ahead in the world. There are going to be choices that you will have to make as to whether to bear witness to Christ or to hide. And what the Church is exhorting us here, and what Christ is exhorting us in the Gospel this week is “don’t be afraid. Bear witness to me, acknowledge me before men and I will acknowledge you before my Father who is in heaven.”