

Acts 1:1-11
Ps 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9
Eph 1:17-23
Mt 28:16-20

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Today's Gospel resembles the ancient god, Janus. He had eyes in the front and in the back of his head. He looked forward and backward at the same time. All of us can see the past clearly but the future is enshrouded in sagging hopes and thick mists.

We resemble the Apostles on the Mount of Olives just after the Ascension. The clouds had taken Jesus from them. They were dazed, uncertain and unsure of what to do and how to do it. But the message is the same. The words of the angel, "Why do you stand there staring into the air. ..The task given to you is urgent...and Jesus shall return to you to find out just how well you have performed...so do not be afraid and troubled but do arise and go from here to impossible dreams."

It would be an interesting study to go through the New Testament and see how many times Jesus said, "Do not be afraid." Some form of that sentence was on His lips again and again. He obviously believed that fear was a very real and serious problem in people's lives. And I have every confidence that if He were walking the streets of our modern world, He would be saying the same things now that He said centuries ago. "Fear not!" "Be not anxious!" "Do not be afraid!" We have the question but what about the answers?

You and I need those answers today just as much as the Apostles needed them then. You may be certain that everyone here, one way or, another, faces the problem of fear. We will never be rid of it completely, and indeed we should not. In a world such as ours, some fears can serve a useful and constructive purpose. We need to cultivate and keep a healthy fear of speeding automobiles, loaded guns, and dangerous drugs. Fear of ignorance can lead to educational advancement. A fear of disease can give rise to habits of personal hygiene and proper medical care. Fear is not our enemy across the board. Like fire, it can be a useful servant but a terrible master. What we need to learn is to control our fears so that they cease to be a dominant and destructive force in our lives. So look with me for a moment at Christ's answer to the problem of fear.

1) The first thing He did for His followers was to bring the object of their fears out in the open.

In the verses just prior to our reading, He clearly spelled out some of the dangers they would face along the way. It seems strange that He was telling them they would be arrested, beaten, misunderstood, lied about, and possibly even put to death. Then almost in the same breath He told them not to be afraid, that the hidden things would be revealed and that they could help to shine the light of truth into the dark corners and closets of life.

Many of our fears are like that - unfounded and unreal. We're not even sure what they

are; we've never bothered to define them. They're just shadowy forms that float around on the edges of our minds. What we need to do is bring that fearful thing into focus. Get it out in the open where we can see it and deal with it. It may not be a mountain lion in the bushes. There is every possibility that it's nothing but a milk cow. So Jesus told His disciples the truth. They faced a future that was fraught with all kinds of danger. There was no denying it, but it was better to know than to wonder. The first step in handling any fear is to get it out in the open where you can see it. If it's imaginary it will vanish. If it's real, at least you can see it and deal with it.

2) Then let's skip from here to the verse that reads, "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven."

I think this verse also has application to the problem of fear. Acknowledging or denying Christ is not just a religious matter: it's a practical matter of daily living. There is, of course, more than one way to deny our Lord. We could do it verbally like Simon Peter, but more commonly we do it by what we are and how we live. This, I think, is what Jesus had in mind. He was telling His disciples to remain true to the highest and best that is within them. And this is absolutely essential in any life that would rise above and conquer the problem of fear.

You see what I am trying to say, my friends. At our best we all desire a life that is courageous and strong and rises above fear. There is nothing much better that any one of us could possess than to go out every morning unafraid to look any man in the face, to lie down every night with no sense of foreboding and dread. One condition of that is imperative: a life that is real and true, a life that is loyal to the very best within us, even Christ Himself. There is a verse in the Old Testament that says, "The wicked man runs when no one is chasing him, but the righteous is as bold as a lion."

3) One final thought: Christ's answer to fear has primarily to do with faith.

He talked to His disciples about the sparrows, pointing out that they were virtually worthless in the eyes of men. But then He said, 'Not one of them falls to the ground without your Father's knowledge.' Then He added, "As for you, every hair of your head has been counted; so do not be afraid of anything. You are worth more than many sparrows."

The ultimate answer to fear is faith: faith not as a theoretical belief but as a deep conviction that our lives are not in the careless hands of some impersonal fate, but are rather in the caring hands of a loving Father. Once that idea takes hold of a man's mind, it puts supportive timbers under his life that no amount of danger, real or imagined, can destroy.

The extremism of Christianity should not be of the left nor the right but the extreme center of the Gospels: the Gospel of St. Mark and not of Karl Marx. While "youth must dream dreams, and young men shall see visions," the Sermon of the Mount must be the authentic Christian realism of our personal lives.

If our answer to faith is "yes," if this is our God who and what we really are, then we can lift our heads and turn our faces toward life, and shout with the Apostle Paul, "If God be for us, then what difference does it matter who or what is against us?" That, my friends, is the ultimate and only final answer to fear.

There is a simple little song which the late gospel singer, Ethel Waters, adopted as her theme. She sang it in concerts around the world. Part of the lyrics go like this: "Why should I be

discouraged? Why should the shadows come? Why should my heart be lonely and long for heaven and home. When Jesus is my portion? A constant friend is He. His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.” When you go out of this Church today and see a sparrow, remember God is watching over and cares for that little bird; and you are more important to Him than all of the birds in the world. If you ever get hold of that idea, you will have found Christ’s answer to fear.