

Sunday12

The opening sentence of our Gospel today is “Fear no one.” This is the instruction Jesus gives the Twelve when he sends them out to preach that the Kingdom of God is at hand. He tells them that what he has said to them in secret they are now to speak openly and what they have heard whispered they are now to proclaim on the housetops. But after his death John’s Gospel tell us that these same twelve men were so frightened for their lives that they lived behind locked doors. It took appearances by the risen Lord to bring them out from behind locked doors and to give them the courage to preach again from the housetops. But that is what they eventually did. And that is also what Paul did. Once he had been converted he began to preach Jesus openly. Chapter 13 of The Book of Acts tells us that the community at Antioch in Syria sent him on a missionary journey with Barnabas and John up into southern Turkey, to cities with names like Iconium and Lystra and Derbe. They preached boldly in these cities, but then what usually happened was that while many accepted their teachings about Jesus others stirred up the crowds against them and they were forced to leave these cities, one after another. In Iconium they were about to be stoned, so they fled to Lystra. In Lystra the people stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But he wasn’t dead.

When his disciples gathered around him, he got up and entered the city and the next day left with Barnabas for another city called Derbe. But then they doubled back to visit these same cities where they had been threatened with stoning and actually stoned. In other words, they had no fear. They were going to preach the Gospel, come hell or high water.

We all know that this preaching, and preaching with power, with miracles and the like, gave Christianity its growth. If people like Paul had not preached it, Christianity would have died with the Twelve and their tiny group of followers. But it didn't. Christian missionaries have been present in every century, spreading the faith throughout the world. There is an incomplete commentary on Matthew's Gospel from the 5th century (Thomas Aquinas liked it so much that he said that he would have preferred to have a complete copy of the text than to be mayor of Paris) which stresses the fact that without such preaching faith is dead. It says: "...as long as the faith of the heart is healthy, it always sows the seeds of confession with the lips." This is a paraphrase of what Paul says in his Letter to the Romans 10:10: "For one believes with one's heart and so is justified, and one confesses with one's lips and so is saved."

If faith is alive, is real in our hearts, it is going to come to expression in our words and actions. If it doesn't, then we have to begin to question whether our faith has died, has withered away.

But even if our faith passes this test, even if it proves that it is still alive by expressing itself in our words and actions, it has to meet one other criterion to establish its authenticity: It has to generate opposition. Why is that so? Because the world into which this Word is preached is a sinful world. Therefore the Word is going to attack this sinfulness, and this sinfulness in return is going to attack the Word. So it was with the Christian preachers; so it was with the prophets of old. Our first reading today tells of the rejection and suffering which Jeremiah experienced because of his fidelity in preaching the Word of God.

But is that true today? When was the last time a priest at a Sunday Mass said something that caused such opposition that some members of the congregation got up and walked out of Church? Was it in the sixties when some priests preached against the Vietnam War and some congregants walked out? Could that happen again? And if opposition is really a norm for judging the authenticity of the preaching, who is at fault today if there is no such opposition? Are the preachers not preaching the full Gospel?

Or are the members of the congregation deaf to what is the true Gospel? I can think of one easy answer to these questions. Since the congregation is made up of believers, then the preacher and its members are on the same page, the Gospel page. So there should be no opposition here. The opposition comes when the preachers confront people who are not fellow believers, who have an entirely different slant on life and public issues, and who adopt positions which are clearly in conflict with the Gospel. Then there can be and should be opposition. Then Gospel and sin meet to do battle.

And yet so often it is hard to identify what is good and bad, what is compatible with the Gospel message and what is not. Even believers differ with each other on important issues. There are 65 million people today who have been forced from their homes, half of them children. It would seem so obvious that we as followers of the Good News would want to do all we can to help these people. Some Catholic parishes have therefore declared themselves to be sanctuary parishes. But at the same time some among us would make the case that when we are dealing with people who are illegal immigrants we have to judge them according to the law. Others among us would say that laws are made for people, not people for laws, and when laws separate parents from children they are bad laws and therefore must be changed. And with respect to climate

change, Pope Francis and our American bishops are clearly calling us to be responsible in caring for our planet, and that care involves the recognition of the fact that we human are contributing mightily to the planet's endangerment. Yet some Christians, even some Catholics, do not see it at all that way, do not see climate change as a reality or if they do do not see us humans as the main culprits in these harmful changes.

It is claimed that more than 50% of white Catholics voted for Donald Trump. And yet before the election when the Pope visited Mexico and our country, he said that people who call for walls between peoples and nations are not following the Gospel, for Christians build bridges, not walls, between people. Did the Catholics who voted for Mr. Trump hear this remark? Perhaps they did and simply dismissed it as a slip by the pope. After all, he is not infallible in every utterance. On the other hand, those Catholics who welcomed this papal utterance may have done so because they were already well-disposed to the position the pope endorsed by this remark.

Fear no one. Preach the Gospel boldly. That is what we are called to do, even though we know that it is hard at times to determine what the truly authentic Gospel understanding of a particular

situation may be. But in our attempts to determine what it is, let us listen to what our religious leaders say and give what they say more weight than what we give to the commentators on the nightly news.