12th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A, Sunday 21st June 2020

The prophet Jeremiah faced an uphill struggle in his mission to preach to the people of Israel who had forsaken the Covenant with God and turned their religious practice towards pagan idols. Although he faced a vast amount of opposition, he faced his mission with an outstanding spiritual courage and trust in the Lord.

‘All those who used to be my friends
watched for my downfall,
‘Perhaps he will be seduced into error.
Then we will master him
and take our revenge!’
But the Lord is at my side, a mighty hero;
for I have committed my cause to you.
Sing to the Lord,
praise the Lord,
for he has delivered the soul of the needy
from the hands of evil men.’

When Jesus sent the apostles out to proclaim His Good News and to witness to Him before the world, He knew that they were fearful; they had good reason to be fearful, knowing that they would have to face opposition, hardship and persecution so, not once but three times He says, 'Do not be afraid.'

It is normal and natural that courage will sometimes fail us and that we will be afraid. All those who have accomplished great things have known fear at one time or another, just like the prophet Jeremiah and Jesus Himself in the garden of Gethsemane. Fear is not necessarily a bad thing because it sometimes acts in a protective way, warning us of the presence of danger. In this case fear is a grace. Nevertheless fear can also be a handicap; it can paralyse people, turning them into cowards. Jesus knew that the apostles were afraid. He understood their fears and took them seriously, but at the same time He was trying to give them courage, moving them beyond fear, knowing that fear could make them so timid as to be unable to fulfil their mission. He urged them to have complete trust in God, who lovingly watches over the life and death of even the smallest and least valuable of His creatures,

‘Can you not buy two sparrows for a penny? And yet not one falls to the ground without your Father knowing. Why, every hair on your head has been counted. So there is no need to be afraid; you are worth more than hundreds of sparrows.’

The prophet Jeremiah lived out his vocation during a time of great turmoil, which eventually saw the defeat of Israel and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. During his life, he lived with constant threats, yet, in spite of everything, he remained faithful to his calling. He was able to overcome his fears and remain faithful to his mission because he was convinced that God was on his side: 'The Lord is at my side, a mighty hero.'

The Lord is at our sides too, and while at times we will grow fearful, we must not allow our fears to cripple us, for to live a Christian life requires courage. What is needed in life is not so much heroism as ordinary everyday courage. Courage is the most important of all the virtues because without courage one cannot practise any other virtue with fidelity. Faith is a great source of courage. As people of faith, we believe that God will give us the strength to cope with whatever comes.

The greatest freedom of all is freedom from fear. Unless we can overcome our fears, we cannot live dignified human lives. Nevertheless, fear and courage are not mutually exclusive, for they can and do exist together. True courage is not never being afraid, but being afraid and overcoming it and carrying on in spite of it.

The freedom that Jesus' message brings is that we don't have to pretend about life; we can face life's reality with the reassurance of faith and the promise of God's presence. The words Jesus speaks to His disciples are words also spoken to us - whatever the realities of our life, whatever challenges and struggles we face, or might face, the overriding message of Jesus is "Do not be afraid." Spoken by anyone else, these words would be comforting, but spoken by our Lord and God, they give us courage for the present, and certain hope for the future. United to Jesus there is nothing to fear.

God Bless
Dennis Cassidy