

June 21, 2020 Have No Fear Homily: One afternoon, several years ago, I visited the Norman Rockwell museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. An American artist who enjoyed great popularity with the American public, his illustrations turned up frequently in the pages of the Saturday Evening Post. It was surprising to learn that much of his work was done in our own City of Troy. Four of his illustrations I viewed in the museum were inspired by the “four freedoms” spoken of by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his State of the Union address to the nation in 1941. The four freedoms are freedom of worship, freedom of speech, freedom from want and freedom from fear. In his well known depiction of “Freedom from Fear” a young mother tucks her two little children into bed. The boys’ father is standing at their bedside with the daily newspaper in hand. In 1943 America was at war. The unspoken message to the children was “do not be afraid. We are with you”.

No fewer than three times does Jesus command his disciples to have no fear. He clearly understood that the greatest obstacle to be faced by a disciple, by any one of his disciples, who tries to share his faith, is fear. Fear paralyzes us. It renders us mute, unable to speak.

But do his disciples have reason to be fearful?

Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus told his disciples that they would be rejected, persecuted and yes, even killed. He forewarned them that they would be sent out as lambs among wolves. Nevertheless, he assured them that their faithful witness would not be in vain, and that their efforts would not go unrewarded. By following the example of Jesus, who was fearless, their ministry would, in time, bear good fruit.

Today, there is an understandable temptation to soften the message of the Gospel in order to make things easier for the faithful. But a Gospel that bothers no one and questions nothing is no longer the Gospel.

A story: One Sunday, the King of England, Henry, showed up unannounced at the church of a famous pastor, Latimer. When the pastor saw the king he grew alarmed. In his prepared remarks he was ready to scold those members of the realm who ignored the needs of the poor. Henry, himself, was guilty of that sin of omission. So before he began to preach, he paused and spoke out loud to himself: “O pastor, be careful what you say, the King of England is here today. He once again paused, and then said aloud, “O pastor, be careful what you don’t say, the King of Kings is also here today”.

Believers are not afraid of anything because they know they are in the hands of God. As we heard in today’s Gospel reading, “Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father’s knowledge. Even all the hairs on your head are counted. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” (Mt. 10: 29-31)

One October day in 1978, a newly elected Pope appeared for the first time on the steps of Saint Peter’s. His first words were spoken in Italian, “Non abbiate paura”, which means “Be not afraid”. These were the words of Pope John Paul II.

Brother and sisters, do not fear defending the King of Kings. Proclaim him “from the rooftops”, and do not fear speaking on behalf of his Church, warts and all. As Pope Francis often reminds us, “The church is a field hospital for sinners”.

We are Roman Catholic strong.

In closing, it is fitting that I cite the words of a sixteenth century Carmelite nun and mystic, Saint Teresa of Avila. In one of her best known poems, she wrote the following words:

Let nothing trouble you
Let nothing frighten you
Everything passes
God never changes
Patience obtains all
Whoever has God
Wants for nothing
God alone is enough.

All those who place themselves in the service of the Gospel must understand living the Christian life is a daily challenge. Yet we still have Jesus whispering in our ears, “Have no fear”. (Mt. 10:27)

Amen!