

It's been a great joy and privilege to come into the homes of so many of you these days, sharing a cuppa, faith and the Eucharist. This to me is a real gift. The personal encounter with you and your families is joyful and I will treasure this. Thanks also for feeding me well. I believe I have gained at least 2 kilos, thanks to all the scones and sponge cakes. I was also touched by so many of you enquiring about my family in India. Thank you, they are doing well but there is growing concern as the number of new cases of corona virus is more than 10 thousand and deaths more than 300 every day. This is a worrying trend and our frustration is that the government seems very unequipped and inefficient. Fear seems to have gripped the society as people flee the big cities to go back to their hometowns in search of some security. This fear is crippling lives.

When push comes to shove, people react differently. In today's first reading Jeremiah refuses to be intimidated by terror from every side. That doesn't mean that the terror doesn't get to him – he is a prophet, not a robot – it means that he has no intention of allowing the terror to write his script and dictate who he is. Jeremiah has been abandoned by all his friends who now try to discredit him. He is thrown into prison for his preaching, and the army council threatens him with death if he doesn't change his tune. But Jeremiah refuses to be bullied into agreement because he believes that “the Lord is at my side, a mighty hero”. What keeps Jeremiah sane amidst all this persecution is the profound belief that God cares for him. And, less spiritually, the frank hope that God will clobber all his enemies in good time!

In today's Gospel Jesus appears in strong voice against intimidation. He does not disguise the truth that his disciples will be confronted by those who threaten, bully and intimidate others into submissive agreement. Jesus' advice is clear: not only does he want his disciples to refuse to submit to the merchants of death, he tells them not to be afraid of them: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.”

The followers of Jesus are going to come face to face with the kind of violent intimidation that gives them an offer they can't refuse. Jesus tells them to refuse it. They have a real choice: disown Jesus and love, or profess him and face certain death. That is a fearful prospect. Yet Jesus says: “Do not be afraid.” How can the disciple not be afraid? What power is available to the disciple to overcome that fear?

Jesus argues that the Father cares deeply for the true disciple. He takes the example of a sparrow, which was regarded as almost worthless. Sparrows were sold in the marketplace as food for poor people – two for a penny, and five for two pennies. The fifth was thrown in for nothing. “Yet,” Jesus says, “not one falls to the ground without your Father knowing... So there is no need to be afraid; you are worth more than hundreds of sparrows.” Jesus' point is very important: do not be afraid: “you are worth...” According to Jesus your own sense of worth is strong enough to overcome your sense of fear.

If you believe deep down that you are worthless, there is no point in defending anything. Anyone can intimidate a sparrow; anyone can intimidate those who regard themselves as worthless. But if you believe that who you are and what you stand for add up to some worth, then you will be willing to take on those who would rubbish you and your values. That is Jesus' point. Your real worth before God is a more powerful force than your real fear

of your persecutors. That sense of worth can outdistance the hate of all your oppressors. That is why Jeremiah and Jesus and all the Christian martyrs can face their persecutors with awesome courage: they all know that their true worth can never be killed. God's everlasting love is the only real offer they can't refuse.

We can face that kind of intimidation only when we believe in our worth before God. Our real sense of worth can overcome our real fear. The Father offers us his everlasting love. Fear and anxiety cannot cripple us as we know the nearness of our God to shield and protect us. God loves you and cares for you as a worthy son and daughter.

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