



12th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Date: Sunday, June 21, 2020 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** A
First Reading: Jeremiah 20:10–13
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 69:8–10, 14, 17, 33–35 | **Response:** Psalm 69:14c
Second Reading: Romans 5:12–15
Gospel Acclamation: John 15:26b, 27a
Gospel Reading: Matthew 10:26–33
Preached at: the Jesuit Institute in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Today’s first reading contains a word that has taken on new dimensions and has been felt more often in these days than in the past. “Terror is on every side!” We currently are continuing to face the terror of a pandemic. And that’s been enough to make us all anxious and fearful. But even before COVID-19, we knew that terror was a reality in our world. Terrorism is real, and after 9/11, we all felt the effects of terrorism in our daily life. But terrorism is a label of fear. The fear comes from two places: not only from the gravity of the terrorist act, but also from its utter unpredictability.

“Terror is on every side” was the cry of Jeremiah the prophet in our first reading. Jeremiah was not a confident prophet – he didn’t really want to be one. He would have opted out if he could have, but there was no side-stepping God’s will. Like in all our lives, sometimes, we’re in the wrong place at the wrong time. His life was one of suffering: he had to call out the sins of his contemporaries, he predicted the destruction of Jerusalem, and he was labelled a traitor to his country. He was pilloried and publicly punished. He spent his last years away from his homeland. Yet, through it all, he had an unwavering trust in the Lord who had called him. He had confidence only that neither he nor his cause should be abandoned.

The early Church had its fair share of terror in condemnation and persecution. But the antidote was found in the words of Jesus at the end of today’s Gospel. “You are of more value than many sparrows.” God is always to be trusted and, regardless of the seriousness of the situation, God is present as a deliverer. Nothing—not even a strand of hair on one’s head—can be lost. Jesus tells us this, because our God is all-knowing and all-loving. This is a distinctively

Jewish type of argument: namely, if God does X for an unimportant thing, how much more will he act for an important reason. If God cares for the little sparrows and even the tiny hairs of our heads, how much more will he watch over the lives of his Son's disciples. How much more will he care for each one of us, who are infinitely loved by him? Can we trust in God as Jeremiah trusted in him?

COVID-19 has highlighted for us just how fragile life is. None of us really know what might happen next. Terrors and fears may come from a car accident, a doctor's report, a defective plane, or a virulent pathogen. It may appear in a hijacker rushing the cockpit of a plane or a thief entering a darkened house. It may come from the fear of contracting an invisible disease, or of infecting those we love. But wherever terror comes from, our faith tells us that it never has the last word. Our life itself is but the prelude to an everlasting life with God, and no one can take that from us, for the Lord loves "to listen to the needy, and does not spurn his own in their chains," as the psalmist said today. "O Lord, give us an increase of faith and a spirit of trust and confidence." Help us to trust in the good of other people. Help us to be surprised not with fear but with gratitude for all that you've done in our lives.

Those who belong to God are people of obedience – we yearn to know God's will. 'Thy will be done' we pray every day. It is that virtue that is underscored in today's second reading. In our autonomous culture, obedience has, unfortunately, been too often seen as demeaning. To be obedient is seen to be obsequious or spineless; self-assertion is the hallmark of the modern person. We're told we have to be autonomous! spontaneous! And always in-control! But that's just not true. A microscopic virus was able to prove how wrong that view was! Paul tells us that the obedience of Christ has brought us to new life, just as Adam's disobedience brought chaos and death. Christ did not come to assert his own will or to follow his own bliss. He came in self-surrender to lead us to the Father and send his Holy Spirit because of his love for us, for each one of us.

For myself, a good way to check whether I'm listening to God's will is to ask myself this question which I first heard when I first prayed the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius: Is what I'm doing going to build my kingdom? Or God's Kingdom? Am I doing my will, or God's will? Am I trying to do everything on my own? Or can I allow myself to depend on the God who created me and loved me into existence?

Our obedience to God does not make us less than... instead it offers life, and true freedom.

Obedience reminds us that we are not alone. We are called to be men and women for others. Not selfish, but rather able to put other's needs before our wants. Let's reflect Christ in the world through our own willingness to trust in God, to not fear the terrors of the night, but to hold fast to, and to trust in, what the Lord desires for us. His desires will be our own deepest desires too.

Obedience means surrendering to what God asks of us—fidelity in a relationship, honesty in business, to persevere in overcoming an addiction, to love my neighbour, regardless of their race, or gender, or sexual orientation. Obedience embraces going the extra mile, turning the other cheek, depriving ourselves for the needy. Of imitating God in every action, decision and thought in our lives.

Obedience to God means acknowledging that he is the Creator and we – all of us – are his creation. It means seeing God's image in my neighbour so that I do not fear those that are 'other' in my life. It means seeing God's image even in the neighbour who cannot see that image in themselves. Let us resist scapegoating our neighbour from a place of fear. But rather learn to love instead.

When we do these things, when we are obedient to God, then there will be no "terror on every side," for the God we trust is with us, always.

Let's pray today that we might truly have a heartfelt sense of God's loving presence in our lives.

Amen.

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