Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Do not fear those who deprive the body of life but cannot destroy the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both body and soul in Gehenna.”

Matthew 10, 26-33

Today’s gospel reading is all about personal integrity and how we can allow fear to erode it. So, let’s start with a poem:

Burn the witch! The outcry came.
So end the drought her sins inflame!
Tickle her with tongues of fire,
sear her flesh like hot desire.
Burn the witch.
Upon her head we heap the blame. Burning her, we burn our shame.
End fear upon the funeral pyre!
Burn the witch.
In childhood dreams, the sugarcane
burns. Craving sweetness, there we maim
the wildlife, which is set afire
and dies, for sugar and a buyer.
And now the world, itself aflame
Burns the witch.

Kimberley Starr, Drought  (from her novel Torched, p.97)

Even a cursory look at what is happening in our world at present will lead us to conclude that there is a lot of human activity that is being driven by fear. We are afraid that we will succumb to the ravages of the coronavirus. Among the people of Hong Kong there is a palpable fear that the Chinese Government is going to severely curtail their freedom and remove the option of democratic elections and the freedoms of movement, speech, voicing criticisms, choice of entertainment and practice of religion, all of which have long been accessible to them. Underlying the rioting, demonstrating and civil disobedience linked to the issues of “Black Lives Matter” and imprisonment of refugees and asylum seekers is the deep-seated fear that politicians and law-enforcement agencies will continue to cheapen the value of the lives of every citizen and act as though the lives of people whose race and skin-colour are different from theirs are of less value. There is a fear that some people have less entitlement to respect and dignity simply because of their colour. Fear seems to be becoming contagious.

All this invites each of us to stop and reflect on the role fear plays in each of our own lives. What is it that I fear? Today’s first reading offers me a good starting point for finding an answer to that question. Jeremiah tells us exactly what it is that has put the wind up him: “Yes, I hear the whisperings of many: ‘Terror on every side! Denounce! Let’s denounce him!’ All those who were my friends are on the watch to catch me out for any misstep of mine. ‘Perhaps he will be trapped; then we can prevail, and take our vengeance on him.’ (Jeremiah 20, 10)

Jeremiah is afraid that those who supported him are now out to get him. He is afraid that those who know him will turn on him and treat him as later generations treated witches. But he fails to appreciate the irony in the action he takes to retaliate against those who are frightening him with their threats. He wants God to come and terrorise them with “utter shame and lasting, unforgettable confusion”. Moreover, he wants to be around to witness their destruction.
Another human failing has long been to turn on those in the community who dare to express their integrity by speaking the truth. We even resort to putting labels on others, to attributing evil to them, to scapegoating them and have even burned some of them at the stake as witches. We human beings get drawn easily into blaming others for the problems that threaten and strike fear into our hearts.

Over centuries, there have been so-called religious people who want to attribute natural disasters and severe climatic events to God. Their cry is that God uses drought, fire, tsunamis and tornados as punishment for humanity’s waywardness and sin. Their call to us is to appease an angry God by beating our breasts, acknowledging our sinfulness and adopting morally acceptable lifestyles.

When we get the urge to place the blame on others for misfortune, disaster and our own failures, we are motivated by fear or are lacking in personal integrity. While we are afraid that others might think less of us if we admit to our mistakes and failures, we also know that if we can shift the blame to others, if we can turn others into witches, there is for us the false reward of satisfaction and self-justification.

It was the fact that Jesus himself came to discover the paramount importance of personal integrity that led him to say to his disciples: “Do not fear those who deprive the body of life but cannot destroy the soul” (Matthew 10, 28). He came to understand that compromising one’s integrity by cheating, dishonesty, deceit, playing favourites and turning a blind eye to injustice were soul-destroying, selling out on life and becoming a shell of a human being. His own life demonstrated that he preserved his integrity and put his trust in a God who would stand by him no matter what threats were directed at him. That does not mean that he did not experience fear. Arguably, the greatest struggle he faced was during his inner struggle in Gethsemane when fear enveloped him and he prayed that God would come to his rescue. His triumph was that he came through ready to face torture and execution. Yet even just before he breathed his last, he struggled to hold firm to his faith in God. It is indeed fear that is the very opposite of faith.

All this explains why, in today’s gospel reading, after speaking of the fear of violence and the prospect of death, he can add: “Rather, fear him who can destroy both body and soul in Gehenna”. The “him” certainly cannot refer to God who loves us endlessly and unconditionally. It is a reference to the spirit of evil that we can allow to invade our lives and eat away at our integrity.

This is all very challenging, especially in the circumstances in which we now find ourselves. A global pandemic claiming hundreds of thousands of lives is a frightening phenomenon, the likes of which few of us have previously experienced. Racism and the devaluing of black lives and refugees from war, and other violence are evils perpetrated by abusers of power and privilege. They can threaten faith on one hand and undermine integrity on the other, once we allow fear to be a controlling factor in our lives. Today’s readings are a call to us to trust in a God who loves and cares for us in all the circumstances of life and a call, too, to live with integrity, come what may.