

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Fears can be paralyzing. We sometimes succumb to fears because we've learned the hard way we should have avoided something we didn't. Fear plays a positive role, protecting us from harm. But some fears are irrational and these we best overcome. If we don't, they can lead us to decisions that can affect or even end another human life. Fears can also keep us from trying things that would otherwise help us grow.

Fears go away when we feel safe, when we are at home or with people who know the way and protect us. The person who wrote Psalm 27 found that kind of protection in the Lord. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; whom should I dread?" These are enviable lines of great confidence. They come from someone whose friendship with God has grown so strong that the ordinary fears of life just disappear.

The simplest of fears is darkness. When you cannot see where you are going, and you have no one to guide you, every step may induce terror. But turn on a light, and you have more comfort about the way forward. For this reason the psalm says the Lord is light; the Lord dissipates fear.

Today the Church observes Word of God Sunday, a day when we celebrate the gift of the holy scriptures. On this Sunday we begin hearing from the gospel of Matthew, which will accompany us throughout the Sundays of Ordinary Time this year. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he left his hometown of Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum. Matthew explains that this move fulfilled a prophecy of Isaiah, who foresaw that a great light would come upon the people who lived in Zebulun and Naphtali, the region that includes Capernaum. Those people who sit in darkness have seen a great light. Jesus fulfills that prophecy as he comes to bring the world out of the darkness of ignorance. This is how Matthew introduces the adult Jesus onto the scene of his ministry: He is light.

Each of us faces the darkness of fear at inconvenient times. It may arise from loss, instability or doubt. Sometimes in our fears we make rash decisions that make things worse. We fall back on habits that may have contributed to our distress in the first place.

Psalm 27 invites us to remember that our greatest light is Christ the Lord. We encounter him through personal prayer, but especially in his word. For many years Catholics had a reputation of not knowing the bible very well, but in recent decades we have opened up its treasures especially at Sunday Mass. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal says this: "When the Sacred Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his word, proclaims the Gospel. Therefore, the readings from the Word of God are to be listened to reverently by everyone, for they are an element of the greatest importance in the Liturgy" (29). At the conclusion of the gospel of every Mass, when the deacon or priest announces, "The Gospel of the Lord," you answer, "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ." You address Christ, not the deacon, because Christ has just spoken to you. If we listen to his word and meditate on his word every day as part of our personal and public prayer, we have nothing to fear. Christ will be our light.

Sunday, January 22, 2023