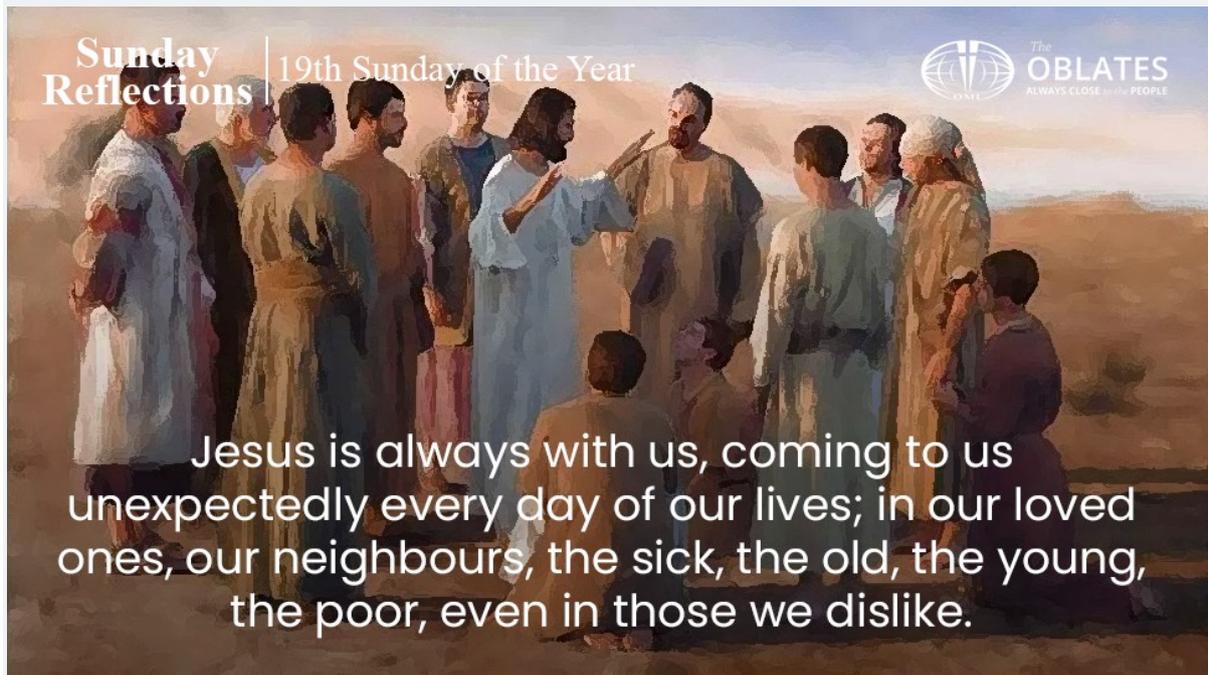


Sunday Gospel Reflection for 19th Sunday of the Year, Sunday August 7th

Written by Fr Brian Maher OMI



There are well established links in business psychology between fear, a lack of self-confidence and difficulty in trusting. Successful businesses will usually be led by people who trust in themselves and have the confidence to overcome their fears.

Perhaps the same links can be found in our Spiritual journey with God and one another. "Do not be afraid" is repeated 365 times in the Bible, a bit like reminding ourselves once every day of the year that we can approach God without fear.

And yet, isn't it sad that for most of us, our relationship with God is based on fear – fear of judgement, fear of hell, fear of sin, fear of punishment, fear of God's anger, fear of that cold, distant figure who sits on a throne writing my wrongs in a ledger?

Fear erodes our ability to trust and eats away at our self-confidence. If I am motivated by fear I dare not trust anyone other than myself, because what if I am let down by the person I trust and end up in Hell for all eternity?

Yet, how can I trust even in myself when everything tells me that my human nature is weak, fragile and very, very finite. Our encounter with Covid-19 over the last two years has shown us just how precarious life is. Fear so easily leads me to a place where I cannot trust anyone, even myself! And this is where individualism, loneliness, discontent, anxiety and depression lie in wait for us, leading us further and further from the God who calls out, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me."

And that is why we must not let ourselves slip by the opening sentence of today's Gospel. We must, not just listen to, but actually hear Jesus say to us, "There is no need to be afraid, little flock..."

'little flock'.... Yes, we are much more a 'little flock' in our world again. Gone are the Empires which espoused Christianity and made of it a pillar of civilisation. We are once more on our own, surrounded, not so much by baying wolves, but by monumental indifference and apathy...

...and we fear. We fear becoming extinct, we fear falling vocations to priesthood and Religious Life, we fear the lack of young people coming to our Churches, we fear the falling numbers attending our liturgies, we fear what we see as falling moral standards in society, we fear what we see as failing leadership in our Churches and governments.....we fear, we fear, we fear!

Yet Jesus says to us today, and every day, "there is no need to be afraid....little flock".

Why can't we truly hear this? Why can't we trust the one who died for us on a cross and rose from the dead to show us that victory will always be found in love rather than hate, in hope rather than despair, in trust rather than suspicion?

These are questions we must ask ourselves. They may be difficult and unsettling questions and.....they may even make us a little bit afraid. All the more reason for us to return to the words of Jesus, "there is no need to be afraid, little flock."

"You must stand ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." For most of my life when Jesus uses these or similar words, they have been presented to me as dire warnings about death and judgement and what happens if I die in serious sin. Words guaranteed to strike fear into young imaginative hearts, and older hearts who feel the call of God getting closer.

But why must these words lead to fear within us? Is it possible that our fear has undermined our ability to really trust the one who, in his life among us, always forgave, never condemned, was always compassionate, was always on the side of the poor and those in need of healing.

If our trust in God is deep enough these words of Jesus are just as much a promise filled with hope and joy as a warning filled with fear and trembling.

We await the full coming of God's Kingdom into our world, but it is not something to fear. It is a Kingdom of peace, and joy, and justice, and forgiveness. What is there to be afraid of? Has Jesus not himself said, "There is no need to be afraid, little flock"?

It will come "... at an hour we do not expect"... but it is coming... it has already begun. If we live in the Resurrection of Jesus then we are already standing ready, waiting in joyful expectation for the final coming of God's Kingdom.

Fear is a negative emotion and a negative motivator. What parent would want to base their relationship with their children on fear rather than on love?

When God's Kingdom is finally and fully revealed it will be the same Kingdom ushered in by Jesus, and I can find not a single word or story or action of Jesus which would make me fear the coming of this Kingdom or not fully trust the one who is coming back to us.

"The Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Why is it that these words of Jesus are always interpreted as being exclusively about death and judgement? Since the moment of the Resurrection Jesus once again lives among us. Every hour of every day, therefore, is the hour of his coming.

Jesus came to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus at an hour they did not expect and he walked, talked and ate with them before they recognised him. Yet there is no hint that they were afraid of the stranger, or that they didn't trust what he said to them. Rather, "their hearts burned within them..." and they hurried back to Jerusalem with "joy in their hearts."

Jesus is always with us, coming to us unexpectedly every day of our lives; in our loved ones, our neighbours, the sick, the old, the young, the poor, the homeless, the different, even in those we dislike and with whom we disagree.

Of course Jesus calls us to "stand ready"... but not in fear. He wants nothing more than that "our hearts burn within us" and we find our true happiness and peace in "the Kingdom it has pleased our Father to give us."

Many thanks,

Brian.

If you have any comments, questions or thoughts on this scripture reflection, please feel welcome to email me at b.maher@oblates.ie

Gospel

Luke 12:32-48

You too must stand ready

Jesus said to his disciples: "There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom.

"Sell your possessions and give alms. Get yourselves purses that do not wear out, treasure that will not fail you, in heaven where no thief can reach it and no moth destroy it. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

"See that you are dressed for action and have your lamps lit. Be like men waiting for their master to return from the wedding feast, ready to open the door as soon as he comes and knocks. Happy those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. I tell you solemnly, he will put on an apron, sit them down at table and wait on them. It may be in the second watch he comes, or in the third, but happy those servants if he finds them ready. You may be quite sure of this, that if the householder had known at what hour the burglar would come, he would not have let anyone break through the wall of his house. You too must stand ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Peter said, "Lord, do you mean this parable for us, or for everyone?" The Lord replied, "What sort of steward, then, is faithful and wise enough for the master to place him over his household to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? Happy that servant if his master's arrival finds him at this employment. I tell you truly, he will place him over everything he owns. But as for the servant who says to himself, 'My master is taking his time coming,' and sets about beating the menservants and the maids, and eating and drinking and getting drunk, his master will come on a day he does not expect and at an hour he does not know. The master will cut him off and send him to the same fate as the unfaithful.

"The servant who knows what his master wants, but has not even started to carry out those wishes, will receive very many strokes of the lash. The one who did not know, but deserves to be

beaten for what he has done, will receive fewer strokes. When a man has had a great deal given him, a great deal will be demanded of him; when a man has had a great deal given him on trust, even more will be expected of him.”

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