

## Bishop's Reflection - 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Around the time that the Gospels were written, some Christian communities were starting to go into hiding for fear of the hostility of their brothers and sisters and the Roman Empire who did not tolerate new religions or beliefs. The idea of meeting in a locked room, and admitting only those who were known to the community, was not uncommon. This would become the “new normal” during sporadic and sustained persecutions for the next 300 years.

Listen to today's Gospel from this perspective. “Fear no one... Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul...”. Seen from the perspective of newly minted Christians, worshipping in the darkness of the catacombs or by the dim light of a solitary light covered by a bushel basket, listening to instructions from the hush of a solitary whisperer, this opening message is one of courage and of hope. A message that cannot stay hidden, muted or hushed, but proclaimed in their daily interactions with the world. “What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.” Many early Christians would do just that; they would give themselves fully in service to their neighbours and some would die as witnesses for the faith they professed.

During this time of persecution, it is estimated that 10% of the Roman Empire embraced Christianity. Despite all the efforts made to eradicate their beliefs and decimate their leaders and communities, their numbers grew. Strengthened by the Word of God, and nourished at the table of the Lord, new believers were initiated into an intimate union with God, in Christ, and a community bent on love and service of one another and the needs of those around them.

Betrayal was not uncommon, especially in times of persecution. There were always a few Christians who would buckle under the pressure of a tribunal or official. In sparing their lives by renouncing their faith, they would further be pressured into delivering the names of fellow believers. For the early Christian community, renouncing one's faith (apostasy), came to be seen as a greater sin than murder itself.

For those who stood firm, in the sight of their persecutors, Jesus' words would have offered great consolation to all who heard them. Imagine the effect of knowing that, “Even the hairs of your head are all counted”. Compare this to the stark warnings given to those who would betray God's name, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell,” and “Whoever denies me before humans, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.” Jesus words are meant to give courage, strength and hope to those who need it most. But they also retain a corrective function for those who might forego his assurance, in times of difficulty, and presume they can take advantage of his mercy after the fact.

In Jeremiah, we see someone who turns to God in his distress and, by doing so, finds the strength and consolation he needs. Surrounded by his foes, waiting to denounce him, waiting for his feet to stumble, he turns to God in his distress. Rather than growing weaker, and falling victim to compromise and deferral with those who oppose God's Word, he grows stronger, to the point of singing. “Sing to the Lord!” Jeremiah proclaims, “For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.”

Drawing strength from the Word of God today, may we call on the love of our God who, on looking after the smallest creatures he has made, has graced us with an even greater dignity. May we never doubt his faithfulness or turn away from the gift of faith but, like sunflowers, turn to him in our need and testify to his love for us and for the whole world.