

2nd Sunday of Lent (A)
(Genesis 12:1-4 / Matthew 17:1-9)
12.03.2017
Stand up and do not fear

Jesus said: “Stand up, do not be afraid”

These words are in sharp contrast with the preceding verse where we are told that the disciples are prostrated, their faces to the ground, overwhelmed by fear.

The attitude of the disciples is not odd or unexpected for pious Jews. They were moved by the biblical warning that nobody can see God and live (cf. Ex 33:20). It was, and it is, unthinkable for a Jew to stand up in front of the awesome God of Israel, the majestic creator of heaven and earth.

On the contrary what is really unheard of is Jesus’ calling for the disciples to stand up. A very important truth is expressed here: our dignity as children of God. In Judaism we already find this sense of dignity. The Rabbi Abraham Heschel reminds us that “the greatest sin of man is to forget that he is a prince.” (*God in...*, p. 417).

However, with the Incarnation, this truth takes a new dimension: we are brothers and sisters of the Lord, coheirs with Christ, and adoptive children of God.

This fact should be present to our minds during our Lenten pilgrimage. As we humble ourselves, as we repent from our sins and try to discipline our lives for the service of the Lord, we have to remember that we should do all this without any self-loathing. We are not supposed to treat ourselves harshly for the sake of suffering or humiliations. We are not animals crawling in the dust but human beings made in the image and likeness of God, called to reject everything which alienates us, everything which makes us less than human. A monk from the 12th c. exhorted his brethren with the following words: “O image of God, recognise your dignity; let the effigy of your Creator shine forth in you” (William of St Thierry, *Exp.* 5:66).

Fasting, almsgiving and prayer are not imposed on us for 40 days in order to make us miserable and to prevent us from growing in humanity. On the contrary, this graced time should help us to become who we are called to be, Lent should lead to our configuration to Christ in his humanity, a humanity transfigured and radiant with God’s glory.

The Greek word translated by “stand up” is the one used for the Resurrection. We find the same Greek word at the end of our Gospel reading when Jesus says: “Tell no one about the vision until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.”

So Jesus’ words: “Stand up, do not be afraid” could mean: “Rise up from the death of fear”. When fears are not channelled in the right way, either they kill us or they make us kill others. When we are overwhelmed by fears, either we imitate Adam and Eve and hide ourselves (cf. Gn 3:10) or we direct our violence towards those who are perceived as a threat.

This dynamic which oscillates between hurting oneself or hurting others is well illustrated in the New Testament: Pontius Pilate is so afraid to displease the Jewish religious authorities that he abdicates his freedom of judgement and feeling (cf. Jn 19:8); and the chief priests and the scribes are so afraid of Jesus that they want to kill him (cf. Mk 11:18).

Facing fears, we are always tempted by two extremes: demission or aggressive violence. Unfortunately, things have changed very little since New Testament times: Brexit and Donald Trump perpetuate fear-driven ways to deal with contemporary challenges.

By asking us to stand up and not to be afraid, Jesus opens the way to our own transfiguration. If our faces are on the ground or if they are hardened and closed by violence, how can they reflect Christ's luminous and glorious face to the world?

The psalmist encourages us: "Look to him, and be radiant" (34:5).

For his part, at the beginning of his Rule, St Benedict exhorts his monks: "Let us arise (...). Let us open our eyes to the deifying light" (Prol. 8.9).

This is what Lent is about: purifying our vision in such a way that nothing hinders us from keeping our eyes on the Lord. Today Jesus identifies fear as one very big obstacle: fears blur our vision and create blind spots on our visual field.

It may be easy to point the finger at the men and women of Jesus' time or at our present political leaders. What do we do with our own fears and their potential violence?

Fear of being rejected can make us manipulative; fear of lacking what we need can prevent us from being generous and from sharing with others; fear of speaking truthfully can make us accomplices of injustice; fear of being challenged can hinder us from listening to others and welcoming them; fear of not being in control can lead us to refuse to share authority and responsibilities with others; fear of growing and of changing can paralyse us and keep us stuck in the mud of our small certitudes; fear of appearing vulnerable can hinder us from forgiving with humility; fear of silence can lead us to create a noisy world where words have become cheap...

All these fears are at work in our world, in our countries, in our Churches, in our families and in our hearts. The Lenten season is given to us as a school of liberation, with the people of Israel we are led from the land of slavery to the place of life and freedom.

Most of the time we will discover that for us to be free does not mean to be without fears: freedom is about knowing and owning our fears rather than being owned by them, freedom is about channelling fears in a way which may be life-giving.

While in prison, Peter saw a light shining in his cell, he got up quickly and the chains fell off his wrists (cf. Ac 12:7). The light of the Transfiguration comes to us to free us from the chains of fear. Let us take heart and get up, the Lord is calling us (cf. Mk 10:49) to freedom and true life.