

St Patrick

(Amos 7:12-15 / Luke 5:1-11)

17.03.2016

Fears

At one of the recent Donald Trump rally in Florida a man showed up dressed as the “Mexico wall”, wearing a white-checked jumpsuit. It was his way to support Donald Trump and his promise to build a wall between the United States of America and Mexico. This message was quite clear. However there was another and deeper message. This man was publicly saying: “I am afraid and I need to be protected”. In a very powerful way, this man visually embodied the fears of many people there and here.

Unfortunately the problem of fear and insecurity is not exclusively American. Allow me to believe that the same dynamic is at work in the United Kingdom for those who want to leave the European Union. All is about fears. For example, after the announcement of the date of the referendum, we heard a British politician say: “Staying in the European Union will make the United Kingdom more vulnerable to Paris-style terrorist attacks” (I. Duncan Smith, BBC, 21.02.2016). We are again hearing the same message as in Florida: “I am afraid, and I need to be protected”.

In a time of identity crisis for many important institutions in our societies, it is as if our political leaders, and sometimes our religious leaders, are using our fears as a way of strengthening the cohesion of their respective constituencies. In playing with fears they seem to expect to reinforce the unity of the group. In this process an important step is to name – and often to demonise – the one responsible for the supposed threat: foreigners, other countries, migrants, those who are poorer, members of another denomination or religion... Everybody is invited to unite against the common enemy.

As Christians how are we supposed to deal with our fears?

Writing to the Thessalonians, St Paul reminds them that they should not “grieve as others do who have no hope” (1Th 4:13). I think that we could apply these words to our subject: we should not deal with our fears in the same way as those who do not know Christ.

Yes, sometime we are afraid, but this should not be allowed to produce distrust in us; we must guard ourselves against feelings of suspicion, rejection and condemnation.

In his *Confession*, St Patrick speaks quite freely and humbly about his fears. While a captive in Ireland, in a dream he hears a voice informing him that a ship is ready to bring him back to his own country. St Patrick writes: “The ship was not near, but at a distance of perhaps two hundred miles, and I had never been there, nor did I know a living soul there (...). I went in the strength of God who directed my way to my good and I feared nothing until I came to that ship” (n. 17). “I went in the strength of God and I feared nothing”.

Later in his life, as he ministers in Ireland, he writes: “Daily I expect murder, fraud, or captivity, or whatever it may be; but I fear none of these things. I have cast myself into the hands of God Almighty, who rules everywhere” (n. 55).

It is the responsibility of our political leaders to make wise and prudent decisions in security and financial matters, but as followers of Christ, it is our duty to remember that we cannot allow our fears to lead us on paths which contradict the Gospel and its values. Like St Patrick we may think that “murder, fraud, or captivity or whatever it may be” are real threats to our lives, yet we have to cast ourselves into the hands of God and remain docile to the promptings of the Spirit of forgiveness and hope, perseverance and trust, love and mercy.

Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful people, defensive, aggressive people inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude and do harm. Yet because we are Christians, in our hearts, in our words and in our deeds fear should always yield to love.

Pope Francis diagnoses the problem accurately when he speaks about the danger for societies and for the Church to be “sick from isolationism or a habitual fear of love” (Tuxtla, Mexico, 15.02.2016) and when he reminds us that we are not meant to fight “with the weapons of fear” (Angelus 22.11.2015) but with the “armour of light” which is the Lord himself (Rm 13:2-14).

Very often in society and in our Churches, we use our legitimate longing for security and unity as smokescreen for our fear of love and our fear to rely on God in faith.

Jesus’ words to Peter in our Gospel reading are addressed to us today: “Do not be afraid!” Like St Patrick and all our ancestors in the faith, it is vital for us not to allow our fears to prevent us from bearing witness to the power of God’s love for each one of us and for our nations. St Patrick tells us that at a time when he was exiled, not knowing how to provide for the future, like a stone lying in the deep mire “he that is mighty came and in his mercy lifted him up, and raised him aloft” (n. 12).

The future of our countries and of our Churches, in the United States, in Ireland or in the United Kingdom, does not lie in retreating into our separate caves believing – and wanting others to believe – that we can get by our own.

Our God is faithful to his promises, he is with us so we have nothing to fear. St Paul reminds us that by his power working within us, God “is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Ep 3:20). Let us not be afraid to love, therein are our strength and our ability to become bridge builders and artisans of peace.

“Let us arise today,
through God’s strength to pilot us:
God’s might to uphold us,
God’s wisdom to guide us,
God’s eye to look before us,
God’s ear to hear us,
God’s word to speak for us,
God’s hand to guard us,
God’s way to lie before us,
God’s shield to protect us,
God’s host to secure us.”
(St Patrick’s Breastplate)