

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I was struck by the beginning of the first reading this weekend:

**Thus says the LORD: Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to save you.** (Isaiah 35:4)

What struck me was a renewed understanding of how much I allow fear to govern my actions. Yet, God says here (and in so many places in the Bible) “Fear not!”

Over the past couple of weeks, I have been asking God to reveal to me the areas of my life that are dominated by fear, and also asking for His gift of fortitude (strength) and courage. What has come from this prayerful introspection? First, I have come to understand in a deeper way something I already knew – I like to be liked; I like to be loved. There’s nothing inherently wrong with this – after all, God created us with a deep need to be loved and to love. The problem comes, though, when the *fear* of not being liked or loved drives me to keep silent when I should speak the truth, when it drives me to say or do something to get recognition, acceptance and love, instead of staying in the background and silent when I should. Having been a performer from my earliest days (I was in theater and music all through my childhood), I know the “rush” of applause and the standing ovation. Having been a clown in high school (a real clown... not a class clown... really, I have the pictures to prove it!), I know the “high” from being laughed with (when you’re supposed to be funny... not the humiliation of being laughed at). The fear of not being accepted, of not being liked can lead to doing and saying things that are focused on me.

What’s wrong with that?

The focus needs to be on Jesus, on God, never on me. As a priest – and I would go so far as to say, as a Christian... as any Christian – the focus should be on Christ. The definition of a good Christian is not that we’re perfect at following the moral law, but that when people see us, they see Christ, that we point to Christ. Look at Mary: her whole life can be summed up in her words of praise in the Magnificat, “**My soul magnifies the Lord,**” (Luke 1:46) and her words to the servants at Cana: “**Do whatever he tells you**” (John 2:5). She was constantly pointing to God, to Jesus, never to herself.

The good news of this reading, though, is that God says, “**Be strong, fear not!**” God Himself comes to save us! The words I have had to utter over and over again, “Jesus, I trust in You!” keep me focused on the truth – I can’t trust in *me*. I will fall over and over again, trying to be liked. My weakness will mean that I won’t be able to do this on my own, but He will help me. The Gospel today speaks about the deaf and mute man that Jesus heals. Too often, my fear makes me deaf to the call of God – deaf to His way to Life. In my fear, I only hear the whimpering voice that says, “You need to protect yourself or else you’ll be hurt again. Don’t do anything that will make waves, don’t go out of your comfort zone. Nobody wants to be challenged anyway, so if you speak hard words of truth – even if you try to do it in love – you will be rejected, ignored.” This sniveling voice of fear then makes me mute, afraid to speak the words of life from Jesus.

The Good News to “**fear not,**” are not just words from Almighty God, though; He acts to show us there is no need to fear. In the Gospel, He shows that He Himself overcomes deafness and muteness. He’s not afraid of encountering our humanity as He reaches out and touches this deaf and mute man. And by the touch of Jesus, He is healed. And I trust – with all my heart – that He will do this for me, too. He wants to do it. He longs to heal.

And if you find yourself deafened to the truth of His love by fear, He wants to open your ears to His Word. He longs to open your ears so that you need not be shackled by the bonds of fear, the fear that keeps you from speaking the truth of the Good News of how Jesus conquers all that is bad in our lives, that He shines His Light into our darkness.

My reflections and introspection have led me to realize how I need to be freed from fear, and to ask God for fortitude and courage. If you find yourself shackled in the same way, ask God for deliverance. He wants to set us free!