

Now as all know our dear Br Simeon always starts his homilies with a joke. A humours little story that makes us all giggle. Up until today I've always resisted doing the same. But then I thought, in the wee small hours, maybe I should also do this. It could be something that is uniquely ours. So here goes.....

Sr Mary-Catherine, a community nurse, belongs to an order which still wears the traditional nun's habit. While on her way to collect more medical supplies from her local Catholic Mater Hospital, her car suddenly runs out of petrol. Luckily, she knew there was a petrol station just ahead, so she got out of her car and walked there. At the station, she asked the attendant to give her a litre or two of petrol so that she could start her car and drive it over to fill it up. The attendant told her that he only had one petrol can, and he just loaned it to someone else.

She told the attendant that she was in a hurry and would look in her car to find something to hold the petrol. When she got back to the car, the only suitable container she found were two of the bottles male patients use when they can't get out of their hospital bed. So, she took the bottles to the station and the attendant filled them with petrol.

Sr Mary-Catherine got back to her car and started to pour the petrol from the bottles into the petrol tank. Just as she was pouring, two men drove by. The driver had just collected his mate from the Mater hospital, so they both recognised and knew what the bottles were for. They stopped and as they watched Sr Mary-Catherine pouring the petrol, the driver turned to his mate and said: "If that car starts, I'm becoming a Christian!"

I have taken three passages from today's gospel reading to spend some with. I selected them, because I think they give us an illustration of discipleship. In verses 26 and 27 Matthew records Jesus as saying:

²⁶ So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷ What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.

Now, I will admit that here we could be afraid, very afraid. What is secret will become known. Oh dear. While this may cause a few anxious tossing, as the psalmist puts it, but here I think Jesus is primarily talking about the message of the gospel. Why do I say this? Well it's because Matthews says Jesus said: "what I tell you". What you hear, shout from the rooftops. It's part of what we call 'the great commission'. Go out spread the word, and make disciples of all nations.

Now because spreading the word brings with it persecution, and we know this because he was treated harshly, so we will probably be afraid to do spread the message. So, Jesus addresses the most obvious form that fear will take -fear for our lives.

²⁸ 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. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. ³⁰ And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹ So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Here Jesus is making a very clear distinction between what can happen to our physical bodies and what can happen to our souls. This is a contrast that we can lose sight of. It's important because it asks us to think outside ourselves. In other words, we should not focus on our narrow physical world that exists now, but to focus on the much larger , spiritual realm that lies ahead. Then he assures us that what we do, and who we are, is known and seen. We are more important than sparrows.

As an aside, and as a Franciscan, I wonder what St Francis made of that passage. He of course saw the animals as an integral part of the interconnected web of creation. And it's probably not too far a stretch to say, he saw them as his siblings.

But I digress. Fear comes from the possibility of loss. Here it's fear for our lives, but Jesus extends the thought of fear beyond the physical to the divine. So often we focus on the here and not the then. So, if we

understand that we are valued, important and loved, then we will not fear and focus on the now, but instead focus on the message and on the future.

³² 'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³ but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

And here is the caution. Don't weaken and run away. Because if you, then you are putting at risk all that you have worked for. Jesus also talks about denial. Now we probably think of something like Peter's denial in the early hours of the cold courtyard. But I think his denial came from fear, and Peter gave in to his fear.

We know that Jesus forgave him, and no one could suggest that Peter will be denied before the Father. We know Peter will not be denied, because after his resurrection, on the beach at the sea of Galilee, Jesus told Peter to feed his sheep. I believe that the denial Jesus is referring to here is denial of a permanent nature. It's the denial of some who rejects the message, who rationally, deliberately walks away from message, and from Christ. I think, these are the people who are being described here and who risk being forever lost.

So if I was to summarise all this in a short sentence it would be this: spread the message without fear, stand firm and don't run away, because we are valued and loved so much that the reward is more than worth it.