

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski

January 28, 2024

Many in the world are anxious. St. Paul urged the Corinthians in today's second reading to "be free of anxiety" "about the things of the world." But anxiety is prevalent throughout the world to this day. And it's no wonder! Just listen to the Prayer of the Faithful in recent weeks when we prayed for:

- Peace in the war-torn areas of the Holy Land, Ukraine, and many other spots around the globe,
- An end to abortion, for those not yet born and at-risk mothers-to-be (By the way: Mary and I this past Thursday were blessed with the birth of our sixth grandchild, Zèlie, to our daughter in France)
- The multitude who are sick, and
- Those who have died—most recently, Linda Knee and our beloved Deacon Steve Livingston.

Listening to these prayers can almost cause one to be extremely anxious about the state of the world around us, which is why we lift-up those prayers to God. Despite these prayers, many experience a high level of anxiety due to the many issues, conflicts and frustrations in our lives. It's not surprising that some of the most prescribed medications, and those which we see in numerous ads, are for anxiety relief: Xanax and Valium, to name just a few.

Anxiety about world events is so widespread that it's even an inspiration for the music in our pop culture. Thirty-five years ago, the musician Billy Joel released a song based solely on headline-grabbing events that occurred from the 1950s to the 1980s, entitled ***We Didn't Start the Fire***. The lyrics in the refrain begin with "We didn't start the fire," that is, the chaos in the world resulting in anxiety; the refrain continues: "It was always burning, since the world's been turning." The theme of the song is that these headline-grabbing events that cause us worry have been around a long time. In case there are those of you who think that wide-spread angst is just a phenomenon of the 1950s to the 1980s, there's an updated version of this song released just last year by the group, Fall Out Boy, that chronicles recent headlines. So truly, "the fire has been burning since the world's been turning."

Anxiety is evident in our first reading, when the people of Israel implore the Lord to designate prophets like Moses to interact with his people. They are TREMENDOUSLY anxious; in fact, they're deathly afraid of the thunder and lightning of God's presence on the smoking mountain (Ex 20:18)—they're in fear of the Lord, not in the manner that we use the term today to mean "to stand in awe of the greatness of the Lord," but they're truly afraid to have ANY direct communication with God. **They want to distance themselves from the Lord.** So, the Lord designated a succession of prophets over the centuries to be

his intermediaries with the chosen people of Israel.

That line of prophets culminated with John the Baptist, who anticipated that a person greater than himself was soon approaching; John identified the Messiah as “One mightier than I [who] is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals.” (Mk 1:7)

In today’s Gospel from Mark, Jesus—the prophesized Messiah—begins his public ministry in the synagogue at Capernaum; the people are astonished at the authority with which he teaches. However, they don’t readily recognize the source of that authority. But the unclean spirits do; they are driven away by Jesus’ loving and holy presence. As a result, Jesus’ “fame spread everywhere throughout the whole region of Galilee.” Fame, I suspect, that even exceeded the excitement—in the media today—caused by a Taylor Swift sighting at a Chiefs’ game!

Here and throughout Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is revealed as the One who has been sent to confront the Evil One, the power of evil in the world. He has come to reveal the authority of God over all creation and He **calls** others to follow him. Last week, we heard Jesus **call** his first disciples, Peter and Andrew, James and John, eventually sending them to “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) to reveal God’s word, love and authority.

Jesus has also **called** us through our Baptism. We hear his word in the scriptures; we sense it in our conscience; we see it in God’s creation. But Jesus wants more—**He calls us to a personal relationship with him**, which is offered to us through the sacraments—particularly, regular reception of the Eucharist and Reconciliation. Additionally, time alone with Jesus in Eucharistic Adoration can open our minds to hear God’s voice.

So, heed the words of the psalmist and “**if today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.**”