

“Have No Anxiety at All”

Homily for the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 8, 2017

I grew up around boats. I’ve lived around boats all my life. And one thing I know about boats is that, if you want the bilges dry, you work at it constantly. Water is always finding its way into boats – up through leaks, down from rain, over the sides from swimming or fishing. Bailing water out of a boat never stops.

That brings me to Saint Paul. When he says today, “Have no anxiety at all,” it reminds me of bailing out a boat. You don’t do it once and you’re finished. It’s constant work.

Think, for just a bit, of all the things trying to pour anxiety into us: the news does it, with possible nuclear war with North Korea, natural disasters, mass shootings, threats to health care, the possibility of higher taxes, leaders arguing with other countries and among themselves. Advertising does it: we don’t have the right things (or your kids don’t). Think of local events: the gang and drug issues here on Long Island, and the violence and the lost and ruined lives that go along with them. Then there are the fears around jobs, around sickness, messed-up marriages, and – well, sometimes it just seems like there’s too much. Anxiety-provoking news pours in constantly; as a flood or as a dribble, but in it comes. And it will fill us up and drown us if we let it.

That’s why we need to learn two things: first, it’s important constantly to be bailing the anxiety and fear out; and second, just how we can throw that fear and anxiety back overboard.

I’m not so great at this: I worry about the parish budget, about the numbers of people who no longer come to Mass, about whether young people are being prepared well-enough to live as adult Catholics, and about personal things I won’t trouble you with. But I also know that spiritual masters through time have said that anxiety and fear stand in the way of spiritual growth; and so they teach us techniques for bailing out our boats, day after day. I need to learn from them, and probably so do you.

Saint Paul is one of those masters, and right after he says “have no anxiety” he tells us how to work toward that: Pay attention to what you let into your mind and heart! Pay attention to what is good, beautiful, excellent... Paul is not saying, deny or ignore the evil, he’s saying, Don’t let it fill your mind. Remember that the world is God’s good creation, and the world is full of goodness – if we look for it. Passively letting our imaginations fill with bad news builds anxiety and leaves us fearful and paralyzed – or ripe for exploitation in search of false security, which is just how many advertisers and politicians want us. Yes, these things we fear are real; but they aren’t the whole story, and too much attention to evil warps us. (You probably know that people who watch a lot of tv news say, when asked, that the world is a lot more dangerous than the facts show. Media teach us how to see the world – and sometimes they’re bad teachers. We need to choose our media carefully, lest it corrupt our vision and our hearts.)

Jesus also teaches us how to bail the boat, how to put aside anxiety. What does he say over and over in the Gospels? Fear is useless; what is needed is trust. Have no fear. Do not be afraid: I have overcome the world. And he leaves us the Mass so we have more than His words

alone: We have a living connection to his death and resurrection, in which he showed that because of God's love there is nothing we should ultimately fear.

An hour at Mass on Sunday can be a relief from the week's pressures, and that's a fine thing; we need that. It can be an hour to let go of stress; and that's ok, we need that, too. But Jesus in the Mass wants to do more than those things for us, if we let Him. If we let ourselves get caught up in the Mass, it will change us, convincing us not just in ideas but deep down, that ultimately we don't have anything to be anxious about. In the prayer after Communion at today's Mass we pray we may be "transformed by what we consume." Anxiety comes, at root, from doubting that God is in charge. Praying the Mass every week is a key way of bailing anxiety out of our boats, of being transformed from people who fear.

The Mass gives us no guarantee that awful things won't happen – in the week after Las Vegas and so much more, we know terrible things do happen, and will continue to. But we can face them with courage and with inner peace, knowing that evil does not get the last word on how life plays out. God gets the last word.

We hear that message at Mass; but to take it to heart, we need to do daily work, to prepare our hearts to appreciate God's goodness in all the places it appears even in our broken world: We can go back to Saint Paul and listen to what he tells us. Every time we follow Paul's instruction we do the daily work of bailing the boat:

By prayer and petition, with thanksgiving,
make your requests known to God.
Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding
will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Finally, brothers and sisters,
whatever is true, whatever is honorable,
whatever is just, whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious,
if there is any excellence
and if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.
Then the God of peace will be with you.