

AGNUS DEI
SERMON PREACHED BY FR. TONY NOBLE IN ALL SAINTS, SAN DIEGO,
SUNDAY NOVEMBER 18th 2018

Hebrews 10: 31 "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

This week was the 40th anniversary of the Jonestown massacre. You may remember that awful event. I was in seminary at the time & remember the shock & horror. I also wondered how those people could be so easily led by such a charlatan. Imagine the fear they must have felt when the mass killing was ordered. The fear of the parents as their children were taken & poisoned. They were looking for an escape from society & were fearful.

Fear is a significant theme in our readings today. The second coming of Christ and the end of all things is the theme approaching the end of the church's liturgical year, which climaxes with the feast of Christ the King next Sunday.

In recent years there have been a lot of movies about the end of the world & aliens. Global warming gives us cause to think about the future of our planet. It is fear of the unknown. Some preachers thrive on such fears, almost rejoicing in the idea of the end of the world. They offer a solution to this fear - only the favoured ones will be saved and taken up to heaven. "Are you saved?" is their message.

But Jesus has already saved us! He saved us by his death and resurrection. He saved us through baptism. And he continues to save us through the sacraments. Every time we come to Holy Communion we are being saved.

The catholic faith teaches us that we receive eternal life in baptism. So we have nothing to fear about this life, and the next. This is why the first christians accepted martyrdom in some horrible deaths. Even today in muslim countries christians are humiliated, tortured and killed because of their christian faith.

This is certainly what Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel (Mark 13:14-23). But you notice it finishes, not with fire and brimstone, but with false teachers who lead people astray. The whole of Mark 13 is about this. The persecution of christians and false prophets leading them astray. And then the Son of Man coming in glory.

We may well think that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" - but we have no reason to fear. For we know the living God. And we have a promise from him of eternal life. Now.....and after death. This promise is made known to us through the Son of the living God, who is our Lord, our brother and our Saviour.

As Psalm 16:11 says, *"For you will not abandon me to the grave, nor let your holy see the Pit. You will show me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy, and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore".*

This verse was quoted by St Peter in his first sermon at Pentecost. He was preaching about the resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ - which is at the centre and heart of the christian faith. The event on which everything hangs. It is both the future promise for us and a present reality.

Hebrews 10: 31-39 puts all this into perspective. and comes at a significant point in that Epistle. Verse 38 (which comes from the prophet Habakkuk) says *"The righteous one shall live by faith"*. The remaining 3 chapters continue this theme of Faith and each chapter begins with a wonderful and familiar verse:

11:1 "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen".

12:1 "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.....let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us".

13:1 "Let brotherly love continue"

So the Epistle takes us from faith, to perseverance, to the saints surrounding us with their prayers, to love.

All this comes after chapter 10. In the previous chapters the writer goes to great lengths to explain Christ's death and resurrection in terms of what happened in the temple every year - when the priest went into the Holy of Holies and offered the sacrifice of a lamb for the sins of the people.

This is why we refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God. John the Baptist knew this truth and said of Jesus: *"Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world"*. These words are repeated by the priest at Mass, when he holds up the consecrated Host and invites us to Holy Communion. And we respond in the words of the centurion: *"Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst come under any roof; but speak the word only, and my soul shall be healed"*.

Of course, we are not worthy. But in one sense we are worthy.....

- Because of Christ's death and resurrection
- Because of what he has done for us ,

Before that invitation to Communion we sing the Agnus Dei. This is a traditional song in praise and penitence to Jesus, the Lamb of God. This is an interesting turn in the Mass.

The central part of the Eucharist is, of course, the Prayer of Consecration. This is addressed to the Father, the Living God. Then we all join in the Lord's Prayer, which is also addressed to the Father. Now we come to the Agnus Dei. Our attention is to Jesus himself. It is Him we address and pray to, in this beautiful and ancient title.

In the presence of Jesus, the Lamb of God, we are truly in the hands of the Living God.

And we are not fearful - as Hebrews suggests - but are full of Faith, and Hope, and Love.