

Homily for 12th Ordinary (A)

I am an Ophid-io-phobic. Do you know what that is? It's someone who has a fear of snakes. I can't stand them. When I visited Australia a few years ago I enjoyed the place very much but I was uncomfortable knowing that of the 25 most poisonous snakes in the world, 21 live in Australia. I was persuaded to visit the snake house in Brisbane Zoo but I did not enjoy hearing some of the locals there gawping at what they saw and offering such comments as, 'that's the one Auntie Sheila found in her swimming pool.'

While I am an ophid-io-phobic I know some people who are arachnophobics, they have a fear of spiders. Apparently the most common phobia in the UK is cynophobia, which is a fear of dogs. As many of you know I don't have that phobia and not surprisingly nor do I suffer from glossophobia which is a fear of public speaking - but maybe you do. Being afraid of something whether it is spiders, snakes, dogs or public speaking usually means we resist any efforts made at trying to persuade us to overcome our phobias.

In the gospel this Sunday it says 'Jesus instructed the Twelve as follows: do not be afraid.' It was no instruction to try and overcome a phobia. Ophidiophobics, arachnophobics, cynophobics and glossophobics are welcome to be disciples. What Jesus is doing is teaching his followers to acknowledge that when it comes to the vision of God which he is proclaiming his disciples must avoid becoming godphobics. And they must try to ensure that anyone who has this phobia is offered help in overcoming it. Jesus's teaching is about giving us the security of knowing ourselves loved by God. Jesus is confident in calling God 'my Father in heaven' and he wants his disciples to have that same confidence but it only comes from good teaching about God. I know from my years of being a priest that a large part of pastoral care and spiritual direction consists in helping people who have been so unhelpfully taught about God that they prefer to keep Him at a distance. Often what they were given was a vision, a teaching which was based on a very limited understanding of what is given to us as the word of the Lord.

For example, in the sacred scriptures it often says we are to fear the Lord God. Moses says this several times in the book of Deuteronomy instructing the Israelites that 'the Lord is the one you must fear.' In the book of the psalms there are ten which include a verse saying, 'happy those who fear the Lord.' When people read these verses it's easy to see how they might come to the conclusion: God is scary and best avoided. But that's not what the fear of the Lord means. When this phrase is used it's referring to the respect and the reverence we can have from knowing what it means to have God with us. It's a healthy fear which acknowledges God's own loving intentions towards us.

Instead of having a phobia about God, we should try and imagine him at our side, a mighty hero. The prophet Jeremiah had this belief and it gave him consolation when many were trying to do him harm. Jeremiah had committed his cause to the Lord God. His example is one shared by the psalmist. They sang of how 'God-seeking hearts will revive' because the Lord's help never fails. This is the confidence which Jesus wants us to have. In his instructions for disciples he is preparing us for the inevitable; for when the living out of our faith in Him is a test and a trial. At such times he says, hold onto the vision of God where the only thing to fear is final separation from the source of life. Hold onto the vision of God where all else, even the destruction of the body in death, rests in the hands of your heavenly Father.

This teaching can console us when we grieve the death of a loved one - our Father in heaven has them safe in his company. This teaching can inspire us when we are being ridiculed or denounced - our Father in heaven is at our side. Holding onto this vision is often hard work but from it countless disciples - among them ophidiophobics, arachnophobics, cynophobics and glossophobics - have gained a security and a great sense of peace. Let's pray to have this today for ourselves and for anyone we know who has a phobia about God. And if they give the slightest inkling of wanting to overcome their phobia let's be willing to help their God-seeking heart to revive.