

Jesus is the living bread

Psalm 23:4: “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.”

Overcome fear with faith. This is the message we can draw from Psalm 23 today and this week. This time throughout the world when we are faced with anxiety, fear, uncertainties and challenges at the individual, family and national levels, what better time to face squarely our vulnerabilities and accept that we are not as powerful as we think. This was very pounced to me as I watched the press conference by the Prime Minister last Friday. A reporter asked the Minister of Health how long he expected the present measures to continue. The Minister simply responded, “This is the reason we have regular updates.” Uncertainties therefore are the new normal. Fear and anxiety are real however, we can overcome fear with faith in the midst of COVID-19 by focusing on Jesus as the living bread.

Overcoming fear with faith in the midst of COVID-19 is one message that can be drawn from Psalm 23. In particular we see this in v.4 our text for today **“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for Thou art**

with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.” Here the Psalmist suggests two things worthy of note as we overcome fear with faith. **First the Psalmist begins by focusing on self.** “I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” and “I will fear no evil.” I walk and I fear are within the control of the Psalmist. In the midst of crisis, the specifics of which we are unable to determine since we have no background to the Psalm, the Psalmist has not lost a sense of self. This means, for the Psalmist the person is of utmost importance in the midst of a crisis.

Moreover, the individual is not helpless in the midst of a crisis. The Psalmist suggests the individual has the capacity, and does walk in faith in the midst of a crisis. Physical activity is suggested here. A crisis does not cripple the person of faith. Here is how St Augustine of Hippo (North Africa) in the 6th century of this Common Era puts it this way in one of sermons (256), “Here...amidst the dangers and the trials we and others must sing Alleluia, “for God is faithful and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, as Paul says. So then we must also sing here Alleluia. Man is still a sinner, but God is faithful.” (For All the Saints, 1995, p.927). Yet, not only is there faith to pursue physical activity, emotional activity is also possible. That is, when the Psalmist says I will not fear or I fear not, one way to interpret the Hebrew word for fear is shaking. To fear no evil is not to shake in

the midst of evil. That is, in the midst of evil the Psalmist is unwavering in faith. It is this faith which propels the Psalmist to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. This unwavering sense of faith is captured by the song writer, who says,

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly lean on Jesus' name

*On Christ the solid rock I stand
All other ground is sinking sand.*

For the Psalmist therefore people of faith walk on in the midst of challenges by focusing on the self. By so doing we overcome fear with faith not so much because of who we are but with the blessed assurance that God is present and God is faithful.

A second thing to note about overcoming fear with faith is celebrating and affirming the presence of God. Here it is very fitting that St Augustine says we are to sing Alleluia in the midst of trial. This is the context in which we worship today. Today is known in the Anglican tradition as **Mothering Sunday and Refreshment Sunday**. Mothering Sunday is an English tradition similar to Mother's Day when all mothers are honoured. Those who are alive are given a red rose and a white rose is presented on the grave of those who have died or it is carried in memory of the

mother. In addition, there is the tradition of the simnel cake. This cake is baked without yeast in keeping with the Lenten observance. A slice of the cake is presented to one's mother, along with the rose. Cake is also given to persons in the community who are in need. Unlike the wide scale commercialization of Mother's Day in some countries, therefore, Mothering Sunday has a social justice component. It puts the needs of the community before the needs of individuals. This suggests friends that to overcome fear with faith there is the need to put the needs of others above our selfish needs.

Refreshment Sunday is the tradition of relaxing the stringency of the Lenten fast. It is here St Augustine says we sing Alleluia. The Alleluia resides in the affirmation that Jesus is the bread of life. Traditionally, the Gospel reading on this Sunday is St John 6, Jesus feeding five thousand persons and his discourse on bread towards the end of the chapter. This year's Gospel reading is on Jesus opening the eyes of a man born blind. Here too the emphasis is on refreshment as a new way of seeing reality. It is seeing things not from a position of fear but of faith. It is as St Paul says, walking by faith and not by sight (II Cor. 5:7). Refreshment here is not just food it is also a way of walking with the confidence that God is present with us as he was with the Israelites as they journeyed through the wilderness and as

he was with the Psalmist as he walked through the valley of the shadow of death. It is the confidence that God walks with us that we can say we overcome fear with faith on this Mothering and Refreshment Sunday. Three things are therefore useful to think about as we focus on overcoming fear with faith.

First, overcoming fear with faith requires fortitude. Fortitude is an old word rooted in the tradition of morality and ethics. It is one of the four cardinal virtues. Cardinal has its roots in Latin and suggests of the flesh. It is similar to the walking referred to earlier in Psalm 23:4. Virtue is focus on that which is good or the good life. Faced with the trial and test of COVID-19 there is need to summon every fiber of our being to stay the course for the next few weeks. As we face the days and weeks of uncertainties we are summoned to focus on the good life. This is undoubtedly difficult for persons whose homes are havens of terror rather than sanctuaries for the good. Think of those homes where there is abject poverty, domestic violence and abuse. Sisters and brothers, it is fortitude or strength of character and courage that will take us through these tough times as we overcome fear with faith by the help of God.

Second, overcoming fear with faith requires action. St Augustine describes the action metaphorically as walking. He says,

“So, brethren, now let us sing Alleluia, not in the enjoyment of heavenly rest, but to sweeten our toil. Sing as travelers sing along the road; but keep on walking. Solace (sweeten) your toil by singing – do not yield to idleness. Sing but keep on walking. What do I mean by “walking”? I mean, press on from good to better (virtue). The apostle says there are some who go from bad to worse (vice). But if you press on, you keep on walking. Go forward then in virtue, in true faith and right conduct. Sing up – and keep on walking.”

For St Augustine as for the Psalmist in Psalm 23 to walk by faith is to put faith into action. It is our commitment for example to observe all the protocols announced by the authorities and to protect our neighbours, family and ourselves as the virus spreads throughout the country. Now is the time to put country above self, reject vice and practice virtue for the good of everyone. This too is what it means to overcome fear with faith by acting or doing everything in our power to protect ourselves and others.

Third, overcoming fear with faith requires intelligence. Intelligence is another way to describe discernment. According to the world Council of Churches, in a document on moral discernment¹, discernment is the use of various sources to

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arrive at a moral decision. Intelligence in this sense is the use of faith and other sources to arrive at a decision. This means accepting faith as one source among many in engaging in right action. So, as the authorities do their best to limit the spread of the virus, and we do our part to be safe, we can also pray for an increased awareness of the presence of God. This is especially so for those who are anxious and afraid at this time. It means the new normal is mainstreaming faith in the COVID-19 interventions. Both faith and science are able to work together as we defeat this monster. It requires fortitude in character, action in national pride and intelligence in relying on faith and science and everyone working together if we are to reap success. This gives impetus to where two or three are gathered since over twenty is too large. House churches which where the church began in the first century takes on new meaning. Size does not matter now as small churches house churches are the new norm for the next few weeks. Online church makes us much larger though they lack the intimate touch. It is the two and three and four of us who gather as family that makes the difference. So as size does not matter we can say, as President Obama is famous for saying, "yes we can."

Yes we can say Jesus is the living bread. Yes we can overcome fear with faith. Yes we can do all these and more by the help of God and with fortitude, action and intellect. To this end we can end where we started with the words of Psalm 23:4: **“Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.”** In the name...