

First Reading: Gen 12:1-4

Second Reading: 2 Tim 1:8-10

Gospel: Mt 17:1-9

DON'T BE AFRAID!

There are many things in our life here in Zambia these days that can make us afraid – poverty, sickness, family troubles, political fights, etc. That's why you and I really need to hear the strong words said by Jesus Christ in this morning's Gospel, "Do not be afraid!"

Last week, when we began our season of Lent, we reflected on our need to be clear about our *identity* as Christians. And we prayed over how our following of Christ will mean we also must face temptations. But like Christ, we can overcome these temptations with the almighty help of our loving God. And that's why we really don't need to be afraid of anything.

The first scripture reading of this Second Sunday of Lent, from the Book of Genesis, tells us about the story of the call of Abraham. God asks him to leave his own country and his family, and to go out to new places, new duties, new challenges. Abraham is not afraid because he hears God say, "I will bless you!"

And in the second reading we hear St. Paul telling the young man Timothy to have plenty of confidence in enduring any hardships in the mission of sharing the Good News. Why should Timothy be confident and fearless in going about his mission? Because St. Paul tells him that he can rely on the power of God and the grace revealed in Christ Jesus.

It is in the spirit of the first two scripture readings that we can learn much from today's Gospel reading according to St. Matthew. The disciples Jesus, Peter, James and John are those whom Jesus had called right from the beginning of his ministry and who would be most closely associated with his mission and be witnesses after his resurrection. Now they are shown the glory of Jesus in the Transfiguration. And they are told to "Listen to him" because he enjoys the special favour of God Almighty.

But I think that the most helpful words the disciples hear come from Jesus himself, when he says: "Stand up, do not be afraid!" Someone told me once that the phrase "Do not be afraid" is used in the Old Testament and the New Testament 365 times – once for every day in the year! Well, I don't know if that is literally true but I do know that there are so many places where God, Jesus, an angel, or a leader of the community tells us: "Do not be afraid!" And that is really encouraging for each of us to hear!

We need to hear "Do not be afraid" in our families. There are so many problems facing families today in Zambia. Marriage break-ups, poverty, sickness like HIV and AIDS, deaths, orphans, children misbehaving, and so forth. It's easy for many to get very discouraged, to lose hope, to give in to despair. But trusting in God's love can be a great defense against fear. This doesn't mean that God will simply mend all the difficulties that lead to marriage break-ups, or that God will give us riches and health, or that God will solve the problems of death. But it does mean that God will help us have strength in facing these challenges. His love will sustain us so that we can cooperate with him and with each other in whatever he wants us to do. "Do not be afraid!"

And in our small Christian communities and in our Church, there are plenty of challenges. You and I need to hear the words, "Do not be afraid!" There can be misunderstandings in the communities, and sometimes leaders may think more about having power than about really serving the people. Poverty may mean that we can't always do what we want to do in our churches – build new buildings, open new classes, provide new services for those in great need. Or we may face the distressing problem of scandal in the church, because of the

misbehaviour of someone who has failed in answering her or his call to faithfulness. Let's be honest, that often does happen!

So we need to hear, "Do not be afraid" and realise that God is with us in the midst of all these difficulties in our communities and in our Church. Some people will criticise the Church, or attack our Bishops, when a stand for justice is taken. Here in Zambia, it is a challenge to advocate and campaign for social justice, no corruption in Government, better care of the poor, improved health and education services, respect for gender, and so forth. And when some people say, "The church shouldn't talk about these things – that's only politics!", then we need to be fearless and consistent and be strengthened by hearing the words, "Do not be afraid!"

In Zambia, we need to be good citizens and that is not always easy. Some people are willing to sell their vote at election times for "chibuku and chitenge"! Others will look the other way when a Government official takes a bribe. Some people might go to the National Constitution Conference (NCC) only to receive the rich daily allowances and not to work hard to give the people of Zambia a very good New Constitution. Yes, we can be afraid of the challenges of good citizenship. So we need to hear the words, "Do not be afraid!" and recognise that Jesus is always right there with us in the midst of the challenges.

During this Season of Lent, you and I should take seriously the beautiful story of the Transfiguration that we hear in today's Gospel. Jesus is "transfigured" – he is shown in all his glory as truly the divine Son of God. And he knows that his disciples need strength and help in following him faithfully in the mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. So when they disciples fall down on the ground in fear, he says very clear to them: "Stand up! Don't be afraid!" Thank God, he says that also to us right now today, and with his help, we won't be afraid to be good Christians, faithful followers of Jesus Christ!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING IN SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

- What and who are we afraid of in our daily lives?
- What challenges do we face in our trying to live as good citizens here in Zambia?
- What do I need to do to do in my Christian community and my own family to be a more faithful and less fearful follower of Jesus?

SKETCH

Have someone act as a single mother whose daughter has qualified for Grade 10. She is so very worried because she is unable to pay the school fees and she is afraid that her daughter will lose the place. With great trust, she prays to God that He will provide whatever is best for her daughter. Before the grace period ends, she finds sponsorship for her child through an NGO. Both mother and daughter are now very happy and thankful to God!

COMMUNITY PRAYERS

- Lord, we pray for the grace to trust that you will watch over all our needs here in Zambia. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- Lord, we pray that we may never lose hope, especially when we face sickness in families and when we are unable to provide the basic needs for our families, *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- Lord, we pray for the grace to be good citizens so that the lives of others in Zambia may be improved. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*