

Fr. Larry Richards  
Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Sunday, September 10, 2006

So, today, when we listen to the first reading, it is a great first reading because the very opening line is “say to those hearts are frightened, be strong – fear not – here is your God.” So often, when I am dealing with people, whether its at a Parish Mission, whether its daily Mass goes, whether its people that left the church a long time ago – they say the same thing – “Father, the church that I grew up in was all about fear – how we need to be afraid of God, and so I have always kind of done things, but I have done them out of guilt, because I got that good Catholic guilt, which I hate, Father.” And so, they have this and they walk around in guilt, and they walk around in fear of God. And that is so wrong, because we have to have fear of the Lord, right? Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. But fear of the Lord is not being afraid of God! And if you are afraid of God, you are in sin! Because if you are afraid of God, and you do what you do because of that, then who are you in love with? Yourself! You do all these things for God, because you are afraid of going to hell! So, ultimately, it us an act of selfishness, your worship, and it goes against the greatest commandment - That you should love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, and all your strength, right? So we have to make a distinction – the fear of God is not being afraid of God – the fear of God is the healthy respect that God is God and I am not! It is coming before God in such awe that when I am in His presence, I am humbled, but I am not afraid. Because, how can we be afraid when the God of the Universe says to us in the readings today “tell those whose hearts are frightened, be strong, fear not...” because why? “Here is your God.” So when we come into the very presence of God, He tells us not to be afraid. We are called to have fear of the Lord – respect for the Lord – Awe in the presence of God, but not walking around being afraid - because if you and I follow God for that reason – it is ultimately a selfish reason – we don’t love God – we love ourselves and we are only concerned with going to heaven - and you know “if that’s what it takes, I’ll do it.” Now, of course, the teaching of the church throughout history – the church has allowed that – that’s been enough, right? But there are two types of contrition – perfect contrition, which means I am sorry because I love God. Imperfect contrition is what? I am sorry because I am afraid to go to hell. Ok, if that is what you want to do, if that is where you want to be – who am I to stop you? If you want to walk around and being afraid of God for all of your life – go for it! If you think that is where God is leading you – go for it! But I’m here to tell you its not! That God wants you and me to be in a loving relationship with Him. He wants you and me to be in awe of Him, but to know that when I am in the presence of my Father, He loves me more than anything else – He loves me so much that He would give up Jesus, His only Son, to save me. How can I be afraid of God, who gave up His only Son to save you and me? We need to come into God’s presence with gratitude in our hearts that He loves us so much – be afraid of punishment, you know if I do things bad, He is not going to keep me going – He is going to punish you, but if He punishes you and me it is because He loves us, right? And so, we can be afraid of punishment, but not be afraid of God. And so, the first thing we have to do when God is talking to us today is first, be strong. What does it meant to be strong? To be strong means that we are people that are surrendered to the spirit God – like I talked about at the beginning of this Mass.

To be strong is the gift of the Holy Spirit, because again, it says in Timothy “we encourage you to receive the Holy Spirit...the Holy Spirit makes us strong, loving, and wise.” So, the first thing the spirit does is he makes us strong. So again, as I said on my reflection on the web today, “the secret of having strength is a life surrendered to the Holy Spirit.” And so, the first thing you and I have to do is to make sure that our hearts and our lives are surrendered to the spirit of God. That the spirit is living through us – first thing – be strong. And the way we are strong is we live in the Holy Spirit. The second thing is “fear not...” And the way we “fear not” is to have such an awesome trust in my Father. That is the only way not to be afraid is if trust replaces fear. And to trust somebody means that they are only going to do what is for my good. That no matter what, it is going to be ok. You know, so many people live in fear of what’s going to happen tomorrow, they are afraid of not having a job, they are afraid if we have another war, or what if Jesus comes back today and I’m not ready, and they live their life in fear! And yet, God says “I don’t want you to live in fear.” And, how do you combat fear? Trust! One of the greatest prayers you can say, which I say it as a mantra – is “Jesus, I trust in you, Jesus, I trust in you, Jesus, I trust in you.” Whenever you are feeling afraid – make an act of trust. Whenever you are feeling overwhelmed - make an act of trust. Jesus, I trust in you. Right now, I am afraid, but this isn’t about me, it’s about you. Jesus, I trust in you! Now, you can’t trust somebody if you are afraid of them, can you? You know you can’t! If I am afraid that you are going to hurt me, I’m not going to trust you, because I’m going to think, “well if I’m bad, you’re going to hurt me, so I’m not going to trust you.” You can be in awe of somebody, and you can have great respect for them....and the best way to look at that is – hopefully, if you had a dad that loved you enough to punish you – so if dad knew you were bad you were going to get a spanking – because he loved you – but you knew that he was always there for your good – because he loved you more than he loved himself. That is the same with God our Father – He loves us so much – he loves us more than He could love Himself – I don’t know how you could say that about God, I don’t know, but He puts us before Him. How? Look at the cross! He let His Son die, so that we could live! That is a pretty big powerful love for us, huh? So, whenever you and I are feeling afraid – “Jesus I trust in you.” You know, some people don’t get me – you know you don’t! Some people just don’t get me at all. Because if the only time your relationship with God is once a week at Mass, you’re not going to get anything I say – forget it! You’re going to think I am a complete nut! What has to happen is – the third thing it says “be strong, fear not because why? Because here is your God.” If the only time you think “here is your God” is on Sunday morning when you go to Mass, you’re going to be afraid a lot, you’re going to be weak a lot. You are going to be wondering what’s happening tomorrow. But if you know “here is your God” when you are at work, when you are at home in the middle of the night and you wake up and are afraid, when you are with your buddies, when you are with your friends, when you are on a plane – wherever you are – if you know “here is your God” no matter where you are – if God is part of your life 24-hours a day, 7 days a week, and not just part of your life one hour a week, then you can be strong, then you can fear not, because you know that you are never alone. Do you see the greatness of our God? He just doesn’t come up there from somewhere and say “ok, I’ll pull you out of things,” he says “I love you so much, I am Emanuel” – God is with us no matter where we are. God is here. When you go out in the parking lot after Mass, God is here.

When you are driving home, God is here, when you are sitting on the toilet, God is here, can you imagine? Everywhere you are – God is here! And if we can make that trust that because of you I am strong, because you are God I trust you – because you are with me I can do anything – I can face anything, because I am not alone. So God commands me to say to you “tell those whose hearts are frightened, be strong, fear not – here is your God.” May each of you know His love today and forever. Amen.