

My Brothers and Sisters,

In today's first reading, God through the Prophet Isaiah says, "*Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not.*" Throughout the Old and New Testaments, we are told not to fear. Today many people live in fear. Many people are paralyzed by all kinds of fears. Many fears arise from what is going on around us. However, although bad things happen, they do not happen to most people.

One author has suggested that four fears play a prominent role in destroying us or keeping us from allowing our light to shine: "the fear of failure, the fear of rejection, the fear of pain, and the fear of death." These fears are not triggered by what is going on around us but what is going on inside us. Fear not only paralyzes. It enslaves. What are your greatest fears?

When God calls us to be strong, he is not so much advising us to be emotionally stronger but stronger in faith: "*Here is your God, he comes with vindication; With divine recompense he comes to save you.*" We have to remember that Isaiah is ultimately prophesying about the coming of Christ and salvation in Christ. Christ is our vindicator. He is our vindicator in his life but also, and especially, in his death and resurrection. Ultimately, it is because of Jesus' death and resurrection—and our faith in Jesus' death and resurrection—that we can be strong and fear not.

At the same time, many of us are more fragile than we like to admit. No matter how strong our faith, some of us still suffer from fear and anxiety. We should never see this fear and anxiety as a lack of faith. Rather we should see it as an invitation to seek professional help. Psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers can all be instruments of God's healing love. If you suffer from endless fears and/or severe anxiety, for you own well-being, as well as the well-being of your family and friends, please be open to seeking professional help.

Isaiah goes on to prophesy that the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf will be cleared, and the tongue of the mute will sing. All of these are signs of the coming of God's kingdom in Christ and signs of fullness of life. When Jesus healed the man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, we saw the beginning of the fulfillment of this prophecy of Isaiah.

Today's second reading is one of the most interesting passages in the Letter of St. James. James tells the people not to show partiality among people. The passage suggests that people must have been showing partiality to wealthy people when they came to celebrate Eucharist. The wording is intriguing:

*For if a man with gold rings on his fingers and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and a poor person in shabby clothes also comes in, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Sit here, please," while you say to the poor one, "Stand there," or "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil designs?*

St. James notes that the community not only gives the wealthy person the place of honor, but he notes that they pay attention to him. We are often like them. Not only do we give the rich, the famous, the educated places of honor, but we tend to pay attention to them and not pay attention to, sometimes not even notice, the poor. The Eucharist is intended to be the sacrament of unity, the sign of unity, but also the cause of unity. So often today, as in the past, the Eucharist becomes a sign of division.

My brothers and sisters, it seems to me that as Catholic Christian communities, we should welcome everyone to come to church without judgment. Some Catholics fear that doing so appears to give approval to people whose life choices do not conform to Gospel values or Church teaching. When we welcome people, we are not making a judgment about their moral lives. As Scripture says, God alone should be the only judge.