

I'm afraid.

I've got quite a few fears at this time.

Terrorism and the increase of violence in our world concerns me and I fear for the kind of world into which my grand nephews and nieces will grow.

I'm afraid that the Church may not listen to the signs of the times and that people will continue to be hurt.....

I'm afraid that people will continue to walk away from the Church.

I'm afraid that I, too, may prove to be unworthy.

Given the present climate, it would be strange indeed if any of us did not experience fear and apprehension about the Church and its role in the world.

When Jesus sent his apostles out to be his witnesses in the world, he knew that they would be putting their lives in danger as they faced a hostile world. He knew that as a consequence they were afraid. He understood their fears and tried to allay them. He told them not to be afraid of human beings who can kill the body but can do no more. They should fear God who can condemn a person to an even worse fate – eternal separation from He who is goodness, beauty and truth.

There is such a thing as a holy fear of God. Scripture tells us that “Fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.” It means the fear of displeasing God, the fear of losing God which is what eternal damnation is about. These can be powerful motivating forces. Fear sometimes has a protective function, warning us of the presence of danger. Often, fear is a grace.

But Jesus is not telling us that we should base our relationship with God on fear. Rather, he is urging us to base it on trust. He says, “Can you not buy two sparrows for a penny? And yet not one sparrow falls to the ground without your Father knowing.....So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”

What Jesus is doing is trying to move us from fear to trust. Fear creates suspicion, distance, defensiveness and insecurity. Trust leads to closeness, intimacy, and a sense of safety. Jesus wants us to know how far-reaching and all-embracing is the knowledge and care of God. Everything that happens to any of his creatures, even the most insignificant of them, is seen by God and is important to him..... beautifully illustrated by Jesus' reference

to the fall of a single sparrow. The fact that God doesn't prevent this fall, or this evil, or this suffering, doesn't mean he is indifferent to it. God is never indifferent about the fate of any of his creatures.

Still, we have no guarantee that nothing bad will ever happen to us. During our years of priestly training we were told that the Church was "the perfect society".... We even had a thesis to prove it! I think now we know that the Church is made up of lots of people who, like the rest of us, have feet of clay.

Faith is not a comforting illusion that all is well. Rather it means to know that life is full of risk, full of insecurity, and yet to rejoice in it – to know that our vocation as baptized people is to work with Christ to *redeem* a broken world – and, dare we say it, to redeem a broken Church! That is the essence of faith.

Nowadays, thanks to the security camera, we are always being watched, watched by a cold, dispassionate eye intent on catching us in wrongdoing. The feeling that someone is watching you is not a pleasant feeling. But the feeling that someone is watching *over* you is very comforting.

God is not watching us. He is watching *over* us. The conviction that God is watching over us gives us comfort, strength and hope especially in times of difficulty and danger. In the end only God can allay our deepest fears.