

Sermon 09 August 2020

A very happy and blessed women's day to all the women. I must admit that I have mixed feelings about celebrating such days. Yes, it is important to celebrate women and their contribution in, and to, our lives and society. To celebrate their worth. Their value. Their being. But I also know that for some women this celebration is meaningless because they are not treated with love and respect. They are not valued. In fact many women suffer violence and abuse at the hands of the very people who say they love them.

So... what does celebrating Women's day mean in the light of our readings today and in the light of violence and abuse against women and children in our country? In the light of the very distressing acts of gender based violence (GBV), how do we defend and bring about healing and transformation for the many women in our society, our communities and families who are affected by such abuse?

When we look at our readings this week we are confronted by various frightening, violent and brutal elements that so many face today especially those who face gender based violence. Professor and author, Frank Rogers JR. summarises the theme of our readings with these words, "Beaten and left for dead in a dried up well; sold into slavery by your own family; tossed about by the tempest winds within a stormy sea. Life can be brutal. Sometimes, we find ourselves battered and abandoned, swallowed alone in a pitch-black emptiness. Where is God in the abyss of our lives? What is faith when we feel forsaken and forgotten?" (Upper Room Disciplines 2020) These are words that Rogers uses to describe what lies at the heart of our readings today. But they are also words that resonate with many who suffer abuse and violence.

The Genesis reading tells the story of Joseph - a story of brutality, abuse, abandonment and betrayal at the hands of his own family. Familiar stories and feelings to some in our communities. To some in our midst. In our pews. Many who suffer gender based violence feel betrayed by family and friends. No one really listens to them and takes their stories seriously. No one really supports them in the fight against such abuse and violence.

The gospel reading tells the story of the disciples in a boat far from land, battered by the waves and wind. A story that reminds us of the times we are frightened by the world - by our circumstances – and are left feeling alone and battered. And yet at the heart of these stories is God's faithfulness. We see that Jesus brings outward and inner calm, and a

deeper faith. The disciples acknowledge him as “Son of God” (v. 33) for as God did at the time of creation, Jesus controls the waters, then believed to be chaotic and evil.

The psalmist too retells the story of God’s faithfulness even when all seems and looks hopeless. And in the reading from Romans, Paul tells of God’s generous love, compassion and salvation for all. A message that will only be heard if we share it in word and deed. We can bring the message of hope and compassion to all who suffer when we listen to and believe – when we take seriously - the stories of those who suffer gender based violence. We make God’s voice heard - that salvation is for everyone - when we join conversations and speak out against demeaning language and jokes specifically aimed at belittling women.

Sometimes we need to move out of our comfort zones – leave our boats, like Peter – and draw closer/near to Jesus. Taking a chance and being challenged to do as Jesus does - feed the hungry, break down barriers, be generous and compassionate, do whatever is necessary to make a difference in the world...work for justice and an end to gender based violence. To intervene and act on behalf of those being threatened and assaulted. To prevent and address abuse and violence. To restore all that has been broken. We can only do this when we come before God aware of our human weaknesses and ask God to empower us to bring his hope, his redemptive change, to our situations.

In all of this – when we are afraid - we need to remember God’s goodness, faithfulness and compassion and to hear Jesus’ words “Take courage It is I! Don’t be afraid.”

Yes, it may be very difficult to not be afraid. It can be very frightening to stand up against injustice and abuse. To go against what has been normalised. It is so much easier to look the other way or go with the flow and not make waves. Let us remember that when Peter became frightened and started to sink Jesus “stretched out his hand (and) took hold of” him and Jesus will do the same for us when we cry out to him to save us.

May we celebrate this women’s day by stretching out our hands in love and compassion to those who suffer, particularly to those who are victims of gender based violence. May we take courage and not be afraid as we act to show the women in our communities and families that their pain is our pain. That their lives matter.

Let us pray

God of love, compassion and healing we bring before you all the people whose stories we have witnessed and all those whose stories have shaped our lives. Fill us with your courage that we may bring hope to those who live in fear. Comfort and strengthen women and girls when they are victims of violence for no reason other than their gender; bless them with communities of love and support. Guide men and boys to seek equitable treatment for all people regardless of gender, and to cast off masculinities that degrade, diminish or harm women and girls. We pray this in Jesus name.

Amen