

A doctor phoned his patient one day and told him, I have some bad news and some worse news. The bad news is that all your tests show that you have only 24 hours to live.” The patient responded, “What could be worse than that news?” The doctor said, “I have been trying to reach you since yesterday.”

Pope John Paul II became pope in October of 1978. The world at that time was filled with bad news. The cold war was threatening world peace, Modern culture was destroying social and moral values. Priests and nuns were leaving the ministry in droves and people were still arguing about the implementation of the Second Vatican Council.

So the Pope’s message to the Church and the world were the words that we hear in our gospel from Matthew today, “Be not afraid.” Remarkably these three words are just as important for us today as we watch and listen to the bad news of our own times. Fear and uncertainty are everywhere and we are being saturated with 24 hour news coverage of it. Is it any wonder that many people are being consumed by fears that are irrational and

situations that we can't do anything about except to pray.

In the gospel from Matthew today we are witnessing the aftermath of Jesus feeding the crowd of 5 thousand with 5 loaves and 2 fish. After this miracle Jesus directs his apostles to get into the boat and head out for the other shore. He in turn goes to the wilderness to be alone in prayer. Matthew offers very little in the way of an explanation for Jesus behavior. To have a better understanding of this moment we need to go to John's gospel account of this event. John tells us that after people witnessed what Jesus did they wanted to make him their king. Jesus knew that was not the will of his Father, so he hustled the disciples off in the boat because he knew if they got wind of the crowd's intent they would get excited over the prospect of Jesus being made king. As king he would become the crowd's liberator and savior. Jesus knew that his Father's path would offer them a greater freedom than just liberating them from the Roman rule. So that is why he shipped his disciples off in the boat, away from the crowd, then he dismissed the crowd himself and went off to pray alone.

Back in Matthew's gospel, Jesus then comes to the disciples in the boat, walking on the water. This was unusual for Jesus because usually his miracles were performed in response to someone's needs: Hunger, illness, or possession by an evil spirit. But his walking on water was simply a manifestation of his divine nature. Of course the disciples caught sight of him, thought he was a ghost and started panicking. Jesus has to calm them down with his words, "Take courage. It is I. Be not afraid."

These are also words that are meant for us in the middle of our life storms. Jesus is right there in the middle of our illness, divorce, unemployment, drug addiction and other day to day struggles; calming us, encouraging us and reminding us to focus on him. The obvious place for us to have an encounter with Christ is right here at this Eucharistic table. We bring our fears and brokenness to this place so that we can hear a word that will calm us and give us strength. Think about those people who choose to remove themselves from this table. Think of the opportunities

missed to encounter our liberator and his message of courage.

This absence only gives fear another foothold in our lives and just like Peter we sink into the storms that batter us.

If there is one lesson for us today it is simply this: When we are ravaged by the storms of life and fear swirls around us, we are called to look for the Lord, our savior; to keep our eyes firmly fixed on him and listen carefully to his words, “Be Not Afraid.”