

# Archbishop Smith: Freedom from the Fear that Enslaves

The coronavirus remains in the news. Like you, I'm sure, I've been watching developments. Everything that is unfolding with respect to the virus has one motivating factor: fear. This fear is showing itself in a number of ways: face masks, restrictions on travel, increased attention to hygiene and so on. One way in particular has caught my attention: fear expressed through quarantine. Entire cities are being closed off from the world. The fear is leading to severe limitations being imposed on people's freedom. They are literally held captive due to the fear of this virus and what it might do. Here we are seeing before our eyes how fear enslaves and paralyzes.

Truth to tell, this is not our only experience of the captivating power of fear. Consider the teaching we heard on Sunday from the Letter to the Hebrews. It speaks of people "who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death." (cf. Hebrews 2:14-15) The Letter is referring to a fear that is gripping not a limited number of people but everyone and holding all of us captive, a fear not of a virus but of death itself. It is important to think carefully about what is meant here.

We can all understand a person fearing death as they realize the end of their life is drawing near or if they are in a precarious situation. That is natural. But what Hebrews is teaching is that fear of death is operative throughout our entire lives and exercises a very strong enslaving influence on us. We experience this when things like pain, suffering and failure startle us into realizing our weakness and limits, into recognizing that we are, in a word, mortal. Fear of this leads to a kind of self-quarantine, as we isolate ourselves from reality and take refuge in the illusion of self-reliance. Because of this we are witnessing widespread and deep anxiety, restlessness, and antagonism among peoples and nations, a sad state from which we are unable to escape, either personally or communally.

Yet from this captivity Hebrews proclaims the hope of freedom. In the very same sentence in which the Letter draws our attention to this powerful and paralyzing force, it announces that Jesus has become one of us precisely to set us free from this slavery. God has fashioned a plan to save us from the darkness of evil that harms us, from the fear of death that enslaves us. That plan is fulfilled in Jesus the Christ. To be set free from the fear of death – to live freely, peacefully and joyfully as the children of God – our only hope is to turn to Jesus and receive from him the grace that liberates.

I expect many have noticed how news reports will include interviews with specialists; and the way press conferences will allow the medical experts to give updates and answer questions. Since this virus is a mystery to most of us,

we need the expertise and choose to follow what the doctors and specialists tell us to do. Well, the divine expert, who alone holds the key to the mystery of life and death, is Jesus. Let us defer to his expertise, listen to his Word, and follow where it leads. Only in this way can we know the joy of liberation from the enslavement of fear.