Once two adventurous explorers were on a jungle safari when suddenly a ferocious lion jumped in front of them. "Keep calm", the first explorer whispered. "Remember what we read in that book on wild animals? If you stand perfectly still and look the lion in the eye, he will turn and run." "Sure, I remember that," replied his companion and continued saying, "My friend, you have read the book, and I have read the book. But has the lion read the book?"

More than two thousand years ago, as Jesus sent forth his twelve apostles on missions, He gave them specific instructions which are found in the gospel of Matthew chapter 10. Jesus knew that the world to which they were being sent to preach the Good News, was a hostile, evil and wicked world. He also knew that the apostles being ordinary men with no training and experience, would yield to the pressures of the world, and abandon their mission. So, He gave them the same advice that he himself would follow later.

First, He told them where to go, what to say and do, and what not to take with them. For instance, they were not to carry any gold or silver or money or even a travelling bag. And then He warned them of serious opposition and persecution they would face as bearers of his message, even among their family members. He cautioned them that he was sending them out like sheep among wolves. However, He also reassured them that all the guidance and help they needed, would be given to them, not only in what they should say, but how and in what manner to say it, for it would not be them who would be speaking at that time, but the Spirit of God the Father who would be speaking through them, Matthew (10:1-25).

Today’s gospel is a continuation of these instructions. Jesus exhorted the apostles not to fear anyone but God alone, and to put their trust in Him and in His great love as He cared for them. He said, "Fear no one. Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known", Matthew (10:26). The same idea, in different words, is found in the gospel of Mark (4:22). Probably what Jesus meant was that all that had hitherto been hidden, that is, the gospel which had been suppressed and ignored by some, would be revealed and exposed sooner or later. It means that the Truth will ultimately triumph, and God will vindicate all His faithful children.

As Saint Pauls says in his first letter to the Corinthians, God will ultimately exalt righteousness and judge sin, Corinthians (6:2). And therefore, Jesus said, "What I say to you in the dark, speak it in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim it on the housetops", Matthew (10:27). The apostles were to preach openly and in a straightforward manner and without any fear, the doctrines of the gospel which Jesus had delivered to them in private, in secret, in parables, in whispered hints, and in proverbs. Moreover, they were to do this publicly, as though they were proclaiming it from housetops.

Jesus further said to them, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul, rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna", Matthew (10:28). In other words, Jesus encouraged the apostles not to fear those who hate the gospel and persecute them for they can only destroy their body, but not their soul. Instead Jesus wanted them to fear the one, that is, God, who has the power to inflict destruction upon both body and soul. Here the "Fear of God" means "reverence for God."
To further dispel the fears of the apostles, Jesus used an illustration of God's providential care for sparrows. He asked them, "Are not two sparrows sold for a coin?", Matthew (10:29). Luke in his gospel writes that five sparrows are sold for two cents, Luke (12:6). These verses show that sparrows were inexpensive. During Jesus' time, the Jews who could not afford a lamb to present as a sacrifice to the Lord, in the temple of Jerusalem, were permitted to offer a dove. And for those who could not even afford a dove, they could offer a sparrow as their sacrifice. So, of little value were these small birds that if anyone bought one, the seller would give the buyer an extra one for free. It was about these sparrows of which Jesus said that not one of them is forgotten before God or not one of them falls to the ground without God the Father's knowledge.

Moreover, he told the apostles that even all the hairs on their head were accounted for. So, they were not to fear anyone and that they were worth more than many sparrows, Matthew (29-31). That's to say, if God sustains the smallest of birds and takes interest in the little details of their lives, He would take much more interest in protecting his disciples and providing for their needs because they are more valuable and precious to God than sparrows. Finally, Jesus said, "Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge them before my Father in heaven. But whoever denies me before others, I will deny them before my Heavenly Father", Matthew (10:32-33).

In other words, Jesus emphasized that those who would boldly acknowledge God before others and confess Christ, despite opposition and suffering, they would never be forgotten but rather they would be remembered in His Father's presence, and be honoured, blessed, and glorified by him. But he warned that those who deny Christ would be disowned by him before God on the day of judgment. Thus Jesus, on the one hand, warned the apostles of the dangers in the world, and on the other hand, strengthened them by reassuring them of his presence with them.

The apostles, on their part, truly believed in the words that Jesus had spoken, and literally heeded his commands. For example, according to our Christian tradition and some written records, almost all the apostles suffered greatly for their faith and in most cases met violent deaths:

Peter was crucified upside down in Rome.

Andrew was crucified on an X shaped cross in Greece.

Simon the Zealot was also crucified.

James, the Greater or one of the sons of Zebedee was stabbed with a sword, and then crucified in Jerusalem.

Bartholomew, often identified as Nathanael, was flayed alive. In other words, he was skinned, leaving his body open and bleeding for a long time, then beheaded in Armenia.

Thaddaeus, also known as Jude, was killed with arrows.

Philip was scourged, thrown into prison, and crucified.

James the Lesser or the Younger was stoned to death in Jerusalem.

Thomas was thrust with a spear and died from the wound in India.

Matthew was stabbed with a sword and killed in Ethiopia. Matthias, the apostle chosen to replace the traitor Judas Iscariot, was stoned and burned to death.

John was thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil but suffered no harm at all from it. He was later freed and returned to Turkey. It is believed that he was the youngest of the apostles and survived persecution, and died a natural death as an old man.
The apostle Paul was tortured and then beheaded in Rome.

Of the two evangelists - Mark was dragged by horses through the streets of Egypt until he died, and Luke was hanged in Greece.

What is the message for us?

The martyrdom of the apostles might appear insignificant to many of us because it happened so long ago. But it is noteworthy that they really believed the promises God gave them; they feared God more than they feared men; they cared not for the body, and neither for their life, but cared for the soul, and for the life of the soul, and they were willing to suffer and die for their faith in Jesus Christ.

Today, Jesus gives to us and all who hear the gospel the same instructions He had given to his apostles:

1. Jesus tells us not to fear anyone because in the end, light will dispel the darkness, and truth will triumph over falsehood, and good will overcome evil, and ultimately life will conquer death.

2. In moments of deep disappointment and trials, Jesus wants us to stand firm for the gospel, and not be afraid of those who may have the power to hurt our bodies, intimidate, confuse, or defeat us but have no power over our souls; rather fear God who can destroy both body and soul.

3. Just like the apostles of Christ, let us faithfully follow Jesus' commands, and proclaim the gospel openly, and truly believe in the promises of God, and boldly acknowledge Jesus before others so that He could also confess us to God.

4. Let us remember the words of the writer of the Book of Proverbs who says, "The fear of man brings a snare", Proverbs (25:29), and "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom", Proverbs (9:10).

(P) Amen.

God Bless You!