Are you a discourager? Proverbs says “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (4:23). Our enemy always attempts to discourage us, so that we may lose our heart. Paul in Galatians says, “Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time” (6:9). So, we shouldn’t lose our heart, and we shouldn’t discourage others.

God strongly opposes those who discourage his people. This is one of the reasons why God often opposes the rich. For instance, one of this Monday’s readings, other than today’s reading, was in Luke’s Gospel, where Mary praises the Lord. Here, she says, “He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (1:53). It’s not that wealth itself is an issue (we know this because the Bible affirms wealth as one of God’s blessings in our lives, c.f. Deut. 28:2-11, Eccl. 5:19), but God warns how easy it is for the rich to be trapped into becoming a discourager to others. For instance, James says, “If a man enters your church wearing an expensive suit, and a street person wearing rags comes in right after him, and you say to the man in the suit, ‘Sit here, sir; this is the best seat in the house!’ and either ignore the street person or say, ‘Better sit here in the back row,’ haven’t you segregated God’s children and proved that you are judges who can’t be trusted?” (James 2:2-4, Message). It’s so easy for the rich to sit on a better seat and to discourage those who have less.

In today’s reading, the Gadites and Reubenites ask if they could settle and live on the land before crossing the Jordan. In verse 5, they said to Moses, “If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants for a possession; do not make us cross the Jordan.” At the time, the Israelites haven’t occupied any land; God’s promise was to cross the Jordan and conquer the land of Canaan. The problem was that the people who already lived there seemed to be strong. They already lost heart once when they heard the reports from the spies they sent. And, now, when the Gadites and the Reubenites made this request, Moses was upset because he knew this would discourage the other tribes again. In verse 8, Moses responded, “Shall your brothers go to war while you sit here? Why will you discourage the hearts of the Israelites from going into the land that the Lord has given them? Your fathers did this, when I sent them from Kadesh-barnea to see the land. When they went up to the Wadi Eshcol and saw the land, they discouraged the hearts of the Israelites from going into the land that the Lord had given them.” In fact, Moses was so angry he called them “a brood of sinners” (v. 14). There was one thing that made Israel stumble before the Lord, and that was discouragement; Moses here is trying to prevent this from happening again.

Did the Gadites and the Reubenites know their actions might discourage other tribes? No. So why did they do this? Because they were oblivious. They were oblivious to what impact their actions could make on the other tribes’ hearts. I would like to share my example. There is an Arabic speaking Presbyterian Church in London, called Almanarah Presbyterian Church, led by Rev. William Khalil, a faithful servant of the Lord. At the beginning of his ministry, I often met with him for lunch or coffee
and we exchanged many words of wisdom and encouragement. When I met with him, I often shared about how well things were going at our church. What I didn’t realize was that those words could have discouraged him, because his church was struggling with many things. Did I intend discouragement? No, but I was oblivious to the impact I was making on him. Now, I would do it differently. I would encourage him by pointing out how his work is continuing to contribute to something eternal and significant. I once read a book, and in the book the author shared about his meeting with this pastor, who led the church of more than 40,000 members. The author at the time was leading a congregation of 100 or less. The author said he was so impressed when the pastor of the large church said how he envied him for leading a small church and how he regretted enjoying too much prosperity and fame in his life. Yes, we may not intend it, but we can discourage others obliviously.

There can be something seriously wrong in our spirituality when we become oblivious to others’ needs and what impact we may have on others. I don’t think Moses called the Reubenites and Gadites “a brood of sinners” (v. 14) simply because he was angry at them. There is something in our spirituality that is seriously damaged. I remember hearing Wess Stafford, the President of Compassion International, sharing his dialogue with one of the Ethiopian preachers, when there was severe persecution of Christians in Ethiopia. When he met the preacher, he said, “Pastor, I represent tens of thousands of American Christians, who know your plight in Ethiopia right now and we are praying for you.” And the preacher said, “O thank you, Wess. When you go back, can you please tell them we are praying for them, too?” So, he asked, “When you pray for us, what on earth do you pray for us?” “O brother,” he said, “our suffering you have seen is severe and it is awful. But, it is nowhere near as serious as your suffering.” Wess said, “Really? Can you tell me?” He replied, “Here in Ethiopia, with this kind of pressure, we pray all day long, because we need God in our lives if we are going to get as far as today’s sunset. But, I’m told that in America things are okay. You pretty well got it in order; it’s possible for a follower of Christ to not pray all day long. Some people tell me they can go all week. Is that possible, Wess?” Wess said, “Yes, that is possible.” He continued, “We risk our lives over here to gather for fellowship; we need one another in the body of Christ. We only meet together in the ravines of mountains, only in the dead of night, only when it is no moon and pitch black. It’s worth the risk because we need one another. But I’m told there is church all over, almost every street corner in the United States. You can go there, and you are free to worship; nobody runs in; nobody drags you away; nobody beats you. But, I’m told that on nice days many Christians would rather go on a – what do you call it? – picnic than go to church.” Wess said, “Yes, you’re right, brother. That’s true, too.” He goes on, “We have one copy of the Scripture in my church. Somebody found it and I tore it up.” “Really? You tore it up?” “I had to. I distributed pages and my congregation memorized that book. We could not be caught with it. So, in deep valleys in the middle of the night, when I am preaching, I say, ‘I need Isaiah 58. Who has Isaiah 58?’ And out of darkness, Isaiah 58 stands up and I hear God’s word from the heart of one of my congregation. But I’m told that in America even non-Christians have Bibles. You have as many as you want. Christians have 7 or 8 of them. And is it possible that some of them go all day without reading the Scriptures even though it’s in your hand. And some go from Sunday to Sunday without opening the Bible. Is that possible?” Then he finally says, “Stop it!” “You’re right. You’re right. I’ll tell them and pray for us.” A few years later, the communist regime fell and the people returned to the church after 17 years. In spite of all of the deaths that had occurred, when they gathered together that first Sunday, to their surprise, there was
not room for everybody. During the oppression, the church had grown five-fold. There was not room to get in. That was a very confused first Sunday back. When we become oblivious to others’ needs and what impact our actions make, our spirituality can become seriously distorted.

So, what shall we do? We need to take up arms and go before others. After prayerful discernment, the Gadites and Reubenites came back to Moses and said the following: “We will build sheepfolds here for our flocks, and towns for our little ones, but we will take up arms as a vanguard before the Israelites, until we have brought them to their place… We will not return to our homes until all the Israelites have obtained their inheritance” (v. 16-18). Moses is right; we cannot stay here and tell others, “Look at our land; God has blessed us with this land and we are safe and secure. We hope you will be blessed the same way.” Here’s what we will do. We are going to be encouragers, instead of discouragers, and if that means risking our own very lives, so be it. From now on, in every battle we are going to take our arms and stand in front of everyone else at battlefront. We are going to show we care, and we are going to do it in such a way that no one can say to us ‘you held back and discouraged us.’ We are going to take a risk greater than the suffering our brothers and sisters are going through. And when you read Joshua, you will find they have kept this promise. They took arms and went before the other tribes in every battle.

We, Canadian Christians, need to take our arms and go before others. We have settled in this part of the world too comfortably. We need to realize there is something deeply wrong in our spirituality, when we hear our fellow Christians being persecuted and in suffering and do nothing about it, when we see our fellow Christians being murdered for their belief and worry what we may lose in risk-taking, when we know God is weeping over our Christian plight and not pay forward what God has given us to share. What shall we do, my brothers and sisters? Pay it forward until it hurts and threatens your life. May God grant you such courage and blessings. Amen.