

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Matthew 14:23-33

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.

Immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

REFLECTION 1: THREE O'CLOCK AND ALL IS WELL

In today's Gospel Jesus walks on the water in the middle of a storm. He comes when his disciples are paralyzed with fear as their boat is tossed in a thrashing sea. While it may not be completely evident at first glance, there is a remarkable similarity between the situation in which Elijah found himself (First Reading) and the disciples' predicament in today's Gospel. Elijah had incurred the wrath of Jezebel, wife of Ahab, king of Israel, and as a result the prophet had to flee into the desert. Then he began to despair. He sat under a broom tree and prayed to God to take his life. Although he felt alone and helpless he was soon to hear that the God whom he fearlessly prophesized had not abandoned him. On the contrary, God was near, providing food for Elijah's journey as well as an intimate experience of the divine presence. Elijah expressed that presence as a still whispering sound, nearer to him than his own breathing heart. He was not alone so all would be well. Like Elijah, the disciples of Jesus found themselves in peril.

The fear of their boat capsizing was increased by the fact that they didn't initially recognize Jesus and thought that a ghost was approaching. Jesus insisted that they take courage. 'Do not be afraid', he said. Even though the winds continued to blow and their boat continued to bounce about, the presence of Jesus offered them the reassurance they needed. Their circumstances did not change nor did that of Elijah. The disciples were still at sea during the storm and Jezebel was still threatening Elijah. Both the prophet and the disciples were able to continue on because the presence of God and of Jesus gave them the courage to do so.

Notice how the evangelist says that the disciples experienced Jesus' presence during the fourth watch of the night – that would be 3am in the morning. This is the hour associated with insomniacs, tossing and turning time. If the phone rings at 3am in the morning it is nail-biting time when people may not make the best choices when the rest of the world is asleep. Exactly when it seems that things cannot get any worse, Jesus comes to us walking on the sea of our sadness and with love and assurance he says, 'Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid'. Then like Elijah and like the disciples we will draw courage from his presence – as much courage that like Peter, we dare to venture into the deep. Like Peter, we may also be struck by fear and begin to sink under the cares and troubles of our human frame. Even then, Jesus will be there with outstretched hand, calling on our faith and keeping us afloat. At times like this, we say, 'I believe Lord, help my unbelief'.

REFLECTION 2:

'A BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS'

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells Peter to step out of the safety of the boat and walk to him across the water. Imbued with great faith, Peter steps onto the troubled waters and takes his first steps. Only when he steps away from Jesus does his faith falter, and he sinks into the sea. Just as a mother bird might nod to her chick fledgling to leave the nest and coax it to fly, Jesus invites us with just a little bit of faith to take flight and even to walk on water.

Seasoned sailors can understand why the disciples displayed such fear in this Gospel narrative (Matt: 14:22-33). As the Evangelist noted, it was the fourth watch – the time just before dawn, when, as one sailor put it, 'the funny stuff starts to happen'. Surrounded by dark waters, the waves sound like the breaking of some huge aquatic creature, and one realises how many ways there are to die. We can sympathise with the disciples and their terror at sea. One wonders if any of the disciples knew how to swim! They thought they were seeing a ghost. Even though they had witnessed Jesus' many wonderful deeds, the sea yet instilled dread.

They did not expect Jesus to come to them over the water. Their acquaintance with the Psalms would have reminded them that God only had the power to control the frightening deep. But when Jesus spoke, their recognition of him eased their fears – Jesus was doing only what God could do, 'Truly' they professed, 'You are the Son of God' (v. 33).

When we brave the stormy seas of life, the all-powerful presence of God is ever near to us in Jesus. He has assured us that we will never be hungry as we continue his ministry of preaching and healing. Only a few hours ago, the crowd had eaten their fill and the disciples had gathered twelve baskets of leftovers – a sign that God would always see to their needs. The loaves event also pointed ahead to the gift of the Eucharist, assuring the disciples and us that we would continue to be nurtured physically and spiritually until Jesus' return. Just as God's presence was known to the Israelites in the parting of the sea, so does that same presence remain among us in the Risen Christ. Just as God provided water from a rock and manna from heaven, so does Jesus nourish and sustain his followers.

All who featured in today's lectionary choice had a sense of being overwhelmed; all felt helpless to remedy their situation. All experienced the grace and power of God, and in that moment, they knew the peace of God's presence. We might be inclined to follow Elijah's lead and flee to the desert, or we might feel like Peter, about to drown in a dangerous sea. It is in that moment when the assurance of God's presence invites us to make the move from fear to faith; Jesus is that bridge over troubled waters.