

LOOKING AT LIFE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE GOSPEL



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NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

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Matt. 14:22 Immediately he 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. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Matt. 14:28 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."

From a technical viewpoint, this is an epiphany, that is, the story of an encounter with God.

The first story is also a symbolic narrative and most closely resembles the just mentioned resurrection appearance narratives. As a story within the ministry, it doesn't make a lot of sense – why would Jesus act like this? But as a symbolic narrative dealing with a later church situation it makes better sense. The community feels itself to be without the risen Lord; their struggles, symbolised by the sea, seem to get them nowhere; the boat could well be the church—although the "barque of Peter" is later language; in their profound need, the Risen Lord, presents himself and gives them the deep reassurance of his presence; such reassurance leads to a new strengthening of faith in the Lord.

Verse 28 Even in symbolic narrative, Peter's impetuous, blunt character comes through. This is the first of several instances where Peter takes centre stage. Are we to view him positively or negatively? Peter does respond to Jesus' symbolic power over death and does ask to be saved. He does have faith, however small. At the same time his request is impulsive and presumptuous (only God controls death). Who is Peter to test Jesus? Peter wants to leave the boat, thus spectacularly abandoning the others!

Verse 29 "Walking on the water" means, in symbolic terms, sharing the victory of the Risen Lord. This is true of us all in baptism and true later on when our own faith falters.

Thought for the day

"Do not be afraid" is one of those expressions which goes straight to the heart. Who has not sometimes been afraid? The command not to fear combines two things: firstly, it is a recognition that yes, sometimes we are afraid; secondly, it proclaims that in the community of faith, with Jesus, God-with-us, our companion on the way, we ought really to be free from deep fear, because "all shall be well." Let us hear again the words, "Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid."

KIERAN O'MAHONY OSA - www.tarsus.ie

Peter, the model disciple is a complex mix of faith and fear. The good news is that when Peter falters, Jesus reaches out to steady him and draw him close. And we hear some of his most consoling words: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid".

The early readers of Matthew's gospel were living through a period of uncertainty. The community was navigating its way through storms of insecurity and division. We are in need of reassurance that it is not our imperfect efforts that matter so much as the knowledge that, even in the storm, Jesus is with us, calling us to him, catching us, urging us now to be afraid, calming the storm.

In today's gospel, we can see a vulnerable side to both Peter and Jesus. Such experiences can change people in different ways, perhaps making them more resilient or more compassionate. When have you found this to be true?

TRÍONA DOHERTY & JANE MELLETT - Go Deeper

Following on from the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus sends away both the disciples and the crowds and then goes off to pray. He then comes to meet the disciples who are in a boat on the lake and battling a strong headwind. As he comes to them walking on the water their response is one of fear, a fear which Jesus tries to allay. Peter wants to believe it is the Lord and so asks to be invited to come to him across the water. It is only when his focus goes from Jesus that he feels the force of the wind and begins to sink. Jesus reaches out and saves him and at the same time rebukes him for this lack of faith.

The scene ends with them all in the boat, calm has descended and the disciples are worshipping their Lord and Master. The imagery here invites reflection on what it means to belong to a community of faith as well as to be an individual believer. Through life's storms we will certainly experience times of doubt and fear but this should not disappoint us - rather we need to be in the habit of paying attention to the Lord's presence as one who will always guide us safely to shore.

SEAN GOAN - Let the Reader Understand

The story of the storm on Lake Galilee is surprisingly relevant to our present situation of religious crisis. Matthew describes it accurately: Jesus' disciples are alone and insecure, 'far from the land'; their boat is 'battered by the waves', overrun by adverse forces; 'the wind is against them', and in the darkness they cannot see the horizon.

Many believers are feeling that way today. There is no security, no religious certainty; everything has turned dark and doubtful. Religion is subjected to all kinds of accusations and suspicions. People talk about religion as a 'terminal religion' that belongs to the past; we are said to be living in a post-Christian age. Some wonder: Isn't religion an unreal dream, a naive myth that will soon fade away? That is what the disciples thought when they first saw Jesus in the storm "It is a ghost".

Jesus responds quickly: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Inspired by his words, Peter makes a strange request: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water". He doesn't know if Jesus is a ghost or a real person, but he wants to see if he can walk towards him - not on land but on the water, not on the basis of firm argument but in the weakness of his faith.

Matthew was describing true faith when he showed Peter 'walking on the water'; toward Jesus. That is what believing means. Walking on the water, and not on firm ground. Looking to God, not to our own reason, arguments, and definitions, to support our existence. Being upheld, not by our own certainty, but by trust in God.

JOSÉ A PAGOLA - The Way Opened Up by Jesus

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The story illustrates the power of faith. Have you noticed that when you believe in someone, or something, you can do things that would not be possible when you are full of doubts? Recall moments when your faith gave you strength and courage? Name for yourself the different kinds of faith that had this effect: belief in yourself, trust in another, faith in God.
2. When Jesus got into the boat the winds ceased. Who has been a Jesus person for you and helped to calm a storm that frightened you or made you anxious?
3. The experience of Peter gives encouragement to us when we waver in our trust and belief in God. In his doubt and fear Jesus reached out to him. Who has reached out a helping hand to you when you felt you were sinking?
4. The story ends with a profession of faith in Jesus as the Son of God. Have you had experiences of being rescued from some hazard or danger: experiences which deepened your faith in the presence and compassion of God for you?

JOHN BYRNE OSA - Intercom

Today's Passage looks like one story, but in fact several stories are woven into it, and we cannot meditate on them all at the same time. We therefore separate the various strands and focus on one at a time.

In our meditation we choose our perspective. We can focus on Jesus, the ideal leader, parent, friend, spiritual guide.

On the other hand we can focus on those to whom Jesus ministers - the disciples, the crowd, St. Peter. They are ourselves when we have a deep experience of grace and salvation.

Verses 22 and 23 Jesus sends away both the disciples and the crowds so that he can go up to the hills by himself and pray. This is the moment when those of us who have authority over others feel the need to get in touch with our deepest selves. We are able to distance ourselves from those for whom we have responsibility. We also give them the space to find themselves.

Verses 24-25 Jesus becomes aware that the disciples are in crisis

Verse 26 The focus shifts to the disciples. When they see Jesus they are terrified, but he encourages them. We too when we panic, become suspicious and fearful even of goodness; only gradually do we recognise that it is a moment of grace.

Verse 33. The climax of the story. Jesus finishes the task he set himself - he gets into the boat and the wind drops. We must avoid an escapist interpretation. Jesus does not always calm storms, what he always does is convey the message that he has power over the forces of evil.

MICHEL DE VERTEUIL - Lectio Divina on the Sunday Gospels