

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 13 August 2023 + Mt 14:22-33

In our Gospel last weekend, we saw how Jesus revealed His hidden divinity and prepared the disciples for His coming passion when He was transfigured on the mountain. In today's Gospel, He not only once again reveals His divinity. This time He goes even further, showing the disciples how they can share in His glory, by the power of faith.

To begin, we notice that the events recorded in our Gospel today are not just random occurrences. Jesus knew exactly what He intended to teach the disciples, and so He *made the disciples get into a boat and precede him to the other side* of the Sea of Galilee, so as to eventually meet Him in the village of Gennesaret. But He takes His time in meeting them there. He first goes up a nearby mountain *by himself to pray*. As an aside, it's fascinating to think about Jesus praying. After, He is the Son of God, and so it wouldn't seem as if He needed to pray! But we see all throughout the Gospels that Jesus prays. And so if Jesus found it necessary to pray, how much do we need to pray!

At any rate, while Jesus is praying, a storm comes up on the Sea, and the disciples are being tossed about in a little boat, fearing for their lives. I was blessed with the opportunity to go out on a boat on the Sea of Galilee during my time in the seminary, and the guide told us that storms can come up very quickly and fiercely, as the western side of the Sea is lined with mountains that concentrate the winds onto the Sea. And we hear that this storm goes on for quite some time. The *fourth watch of the night* is sometime between 3 and 6am, and so I imagine that the disciples were about ready to lose all hope for survival, when they finally saw that mysterious figure walking towards them on top of the violent waves.

Now if we stop here and think about what is going on in the minds of the disciples, I am sure most of us can relate to their situation. Immediately before this episode in Matthew's Gospel, the disciples witness an incredible miracle: Jesus multiplies 5 loaves and 2 fish so as to feed a crowd of well over 5,000 people! And so they know that He is not just any ordinary teacher, even if they do not completely understand who He is. They cannot disbelieve that experience, and so they are willing to put at least some faith in Him.

But now, where is He? He has sent them on their way, promising to meet them on the other side. But when they really need Him—when they really need a miracle, He seems to be nowhere to be found. Have you ever felt like that—that in your darkest hour, God's silence is almost deafening? I mean, what kind of God comes to meet us, draws us close to Him, and then seemingly disappears, just when the sea of life gets rough and we feel as if we are going to drown?!

Well, it is exactly in the "fourth watch," when all seems darkest and hopeless, that Jesus comes to meet them. And He comes in a way that leaves no doubt that He has the power to control the storm: He walks on the turbulent waves. Now obviously that is not something

that we see everyday, and so the disciples are justly terrified! And so Jesus responds with words that have the power to calm even the winds and the sea: *fear not*, He says, *it is I, or I AM*. We don't catch this nuance in our English translation, but this is the same divine name that God revealed to Moses in the burning bush. In other words, even in the strongest storm, God is still God. He is still in control.

But in those moments when life throws everything at us, it is often so hard to see that God is still in control. And so Peter tells Jesus to give him this same power—power over nature—so that he too can have some control, so he can believe. And to our surprise, Jesus invites him to come. And Peter walks on water—He gets to participate in a miracle! Until, that is, he takes His eyes off Jesus, and onto the storm. And it's the same with us. So long as our eyes are fixed on the Lord, we can make it through any storm. But the moment we take our eyes off of Him, we immediately begin to plunge to our death. That might seem like an exaggeration. But every big sin begins with little one—a stray thought, a careless word, an unfounded doubt. *We must* keep our eyes fixed on Jesus at all times, or we will not make it through the storms of this life!

You see, Jesus is revealing here a difficult, but key reality of the spiritual life: that is, once you undertake the journey of discipleship, you will encounter many tests of faith along the way. And this is hard, because when we really begin to take following the Lord seriously, we expect things to get a little easier. And in certain respects, they do. Many of the sins that clung to us for so long finally lose their power, and we experience real freedom. But life often, usually, gets harder too. Trials and tests come. And when they do come, what will you do? Will you give up and give in? Or, will you cling to the Lord in hope that He will come and calm the storm? Will you swallow your pride and pray for His help?

Peter's cry here is very revealing: *Lord, save me!* What a beautiful prayer! I have personally found that one of the prayers that gets answered the quickest is a short but sincere, *Lord, save me! Or, Lord help me!* We hear that Jesus *immediately* rescues Peter from sinking in response to his cry. He then entered the disciples' boat, and *the wind died down*. If we choose to keep our eyes fixed on the Lord, or if we at least pray to Him when we are drowning in fear, then He will come to our little boat and calm the seas. Now sometimes, it seems to take longer than in our Gospel episode today. But remember, the 12 are only baby disciples at this point. As a good teacher, God knows their faith is still weak, and so He doesn't test them too deeply at this point.

But later on, the tests will get harder. It's the same with us. Like a weightlifter who increases resistance as his strength grows, or a runner who runs further as her endurance builds, God allows us to be tested. And this is hard and often frustrating, but there is no other way. And this is key: only those who have known the storms at sea and yet have persevered in faith are given the grace to see the glory of God in Jesus Christ. Only those who have passed the test can say with conviction, *truly, you are the Son of God*.