

Sunday, August 13, 2017

19<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year (A)

Conventual Mass

“It Is I: Do Not Be Afraid”

I was seven years old. My parents and friends of theirs planned a Sunday outing to Atlantic City, New Jersey. A picnic lunch was packed and I looked forward to being in the water. It was decades before the casinos had invaded the resort. The Marlborough Hotel and the Traymore, Pacific Avenue and other sites you may remember from playing Monopoly were thriving. It was a beautiful day with blue skies, but the ocean usually so tranquil and placid there was turbulent, agitated by some far-off storm. While picknicking on the beach the sea came up and attempted to carry off cutlery and paper plates. We laughed as we chased after them. Eventually I begged to go into the water. One friend, my father and I made up the trio that went into the ocean. Looking out at

the turbulent surf, my father wisely asked us to hold hands forming a circle. All at once a powerful wave struck me in the back and drove me to the bottom. The force of the wave stunned me and left me semi-conscious. I

remember grabbing at the sand under the water attempting to get a hold. Fortunately, I was still holding on to my father with one hand. He pulled me back to safety.

Although this experience could have turned me away from the water it never had that effect on me. I learned to respect the water, but always looked forward to being in the water, especially the ocean. I attribute this lack of fear to my father's strong hand holding me firmly, pulling me to safety.

Jesus had just dismissed the crowd after the miraculous multiplication of loaves and fish. What is interesting is that Matthew tells us that he now "*forced*" the

disciples to cross the sea ahead of him while he went up the mountain to pray. Was this because he wanted some time to be entirely alone or because he was setting the scene for what was to follow, a parable in action?

The sea, water in all its various manifestations can be life-giving. We need it to survive. But it can also be dangerous and death dealing, witness the disasters that take place even in small bodies of water. For the Jews, even though they earned their livelihood from it and fed on the fish that inhabited it, the sea represented the place where primeval chaos dwelt. It was the haunt of demons, ghosts and other sinister beings.

It was between three and six o'clock in the morning. The disciples were alone, in the dark without Jesus battling against a fierce wind that threatened to sink them. As if they did not have enough troubles, they spied a

figure walking on the water towards them. Of course they were frightened out of their wits. Who wouldn't be? This was beyond their experience. All they knew was that this had to be a supernatural being of some kind, an encounter in the making that sent them into a panic until they heard a familiar voice, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid."

The disciples were right. They were witnessing something that pointed beyond their senses to the supernatural. Jesus walked on the water, a right belonging to God alone to God who had made the sea. The turbulence of the sea did not have power over Jesus. He strode over the waves rather than sink beneath them. The winds that threatened the disciples' boat did not hinder him. The, "It is I," also reminds us of God's identification of himself in the book of Exodus. There is Peter's subsequent address to Jesus as "Lord." All these

underscore Jesus' lordship and identification with God.

The disciples heard the voice, but there was still doubt. Peter's exclamation, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water," reflects this ambivalence. I always thought that if it hadn't been Jesus there on the water, Peter would have been in great trouble! Obviously he took a risk!

Peter was divided between doubt – "Lord, if it is you, - but his deep faith said "Command me to come to you on the water." He proclaimed his faith in the authority of him whom he addressed as "Lord" and who commands.<sup>ii</sup> If it was not a ghost, it had to be the empowering presence of God in Jesus. Then Jesus will do what he always did: he will share his abilities with his disciples and show them how to deal with their fears. But Jesus must command and Peter must obey in order to make the power of Jesus

his own and enter into the reality and mystery of Jesus.<sup>iii</sup>

Jesus bade Peter come and he climbed out of the boat. He began to walk to Jesus, but becoming conscious of the wind, fear seized him and Peter began to sink. He took his gaze off of Jesus and turned it to the wind and himself. Peter is *us*: rash, foot in mouth, betraying Jesus when he thinks his own skin may be involved, generous, yet loyal in spite of everything. That deep cry of his to Jesus after the resurrection says it all: “Lord, you know that I love you!” It is a cry that comes from the deepest recesses of even our hearts in spite of the heights and depths that mark our lives.

As Peter began to sink, he instinctively called out to Jesus, “Lord, save me!” The loving, protective hand of Jesus pulled Peter out of the water to safety. Peter’s initial reaction to Jesus’ presence was spontaneous and faith-

filled. But as is so often the case in Christian experience, faith wavers in the course of time. However, a weakness that brings us to an awareness of God's saving power is really a blessing. Jesus simply extended his hand.<sup>iv</sup>

The winds died, not the disciples. They were safe as long as Jesus was with them. At the end of the gospel, he will promise to be with them until the end of time. Their faith in what Jesus can do will be strong, and they will recognize the source of his power: "Truly, you are the Son of God."<sup>v</sup>

Storms and stresses are part of daily life, but sometimes it seems as if darkness threatens to overwhelm church and society. We are constantly bombarded with news of wars and scandals. We are faced with personal crisis. But all this is a call to an ever deepening faith not in an official or institution but in the person of Christ, who

reaches down in love to draw us out of the waters. In the midst of the strong winds that rage around us, one voice is stronger and sweeter than all the rest: “It is I: do not be afraid.” Like Peter, we must have the courage to walk towards Jesus and grow from our mistakes. Let the ears of our hearts open wide to hear those consoling words: “It is I: do not be afraid.”



i" John Shea,, The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers, Yea A (Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press, 2004) 247

ii" Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year, Volume 4 \*Collegeville, Minn., The Liturgical Press, 1992) 153

iii" Shea, 248

iv" Roland J. Faley, Footprints on the Mountain (New York, Paulist Press, 1994) 526

v" John Shea, 249