

Sunday, August 10, 2014

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

Conventual Mass

“It Is I: Do Not Be Afraid”

After the multiplication of the loaves and fish, Jesus escaped from the crowd to a solitary place to pray. The text says that he “made the disciples get into a boat.” That rather amuses me. I have a picture of rather reluctant disciples being herded into a boat like so many children. I can understand their reluctance. After all, they had just witnessed a big miracle in which they had a part. The disciples had been asked to look for food, and they had been asked to distribute the miraculous bread and fish as well as to gather up the abundant fragments. They now wanted to bask in that glory. But Jesus had business with his Father alone. Possibly he was gathering strength to be the Messiah the Father had anointed him to be, because soon enough the crowd would press him to be their king.

And now the disciples were alone on the sea at night. Even though the Jewish people of necessity made use of the sea, at best they were uncomfortable with it. For them the waters of chaos lurked in its depths. It could overtake them any time. It was also the habitat of monsters and evil spirits.

The time was between three and six A.M. It was a black night. The winds were sweeping the waves over the little boat hitting it hard and threatening to send it and its occupants to the bottom of the lake. Of course, they were frightened! And the Master on whom they relied was not with them this time.

There is an icon called “The Unsleeping Eye,” which depicts the child Jesus asleep. Incarnate as man, he lies asleep, but as God, he never slumbers or sleeps but keeps careful watch over us. And so it was this time. However, I can understand, given the terror the disciples were already experiencing, how someone walking towards them on the water, that symbol of evil, would frighten them still more. “It is a ghost!”

What else could they think? Jesus identifies himself; “It is I” a statement reminiscent of God’s revelation to Moses in Exodus 3: 14.

Early on, tradition saw in the boat “tossed by wind and waves, for the wind was against it,” an image of the church, struggling against the forces of evil. The darkness of night, Jesus’ absence, and the need to reach the other shore are details that well describe the situation of the Christian community and its need for faith.<sup>i</sup> The church in which the apostles conduct their mission is a church beset by persecution, opposition, apostasy and scandals.<sup>ii</sup> It is the darkness of the fourth watch of the night.

In this turmoil it is the presence of Christ that saves. His lordship is made manifest in a number of ways: He walks on the water, he identifies himself in a way that reminds us of God’s revelation to Moses. Peter addresses him as “Lord” and pleads for salvation. The story ends with a full post-Easter affirmation of faith: “Truly, you are the Son of God.” The serenity of Jesus in contrast to the panic of

the disciples is intended as a message of encouragement in difficult circumstances.<sup>iii</sup>

“Take courage. It is I: do not be afraid.” Peter hears. He acknowledges Jesus as Lord, that is as someone with a special relationship to God, but asks for further confirmation. If it is not a ghost, if it is the presence of God in Jesus, he will share his powers with his disciples. He will show them how to deal with fear the way he deals with fear. But Peter cannot presume this. It has to be done the way of Jesus.<sup>iv</sup>

Jesus must issue a command and Peter must obey. In obeying, Peter will enter into the mystery of Jesus and be able to Jesus on the water. Therefore, Peter does not ask to walk on the water. Rather he asks that Jesus command him to come to him on the water. It is a journey ever deeper into Christ; a journey that includes the overcoming of fear.<sup>v</sup>

Peter courageously obeys the command of Jesus. Initially, with eyes fixed on Jesus, he becomes a fearless walker of the waves. But then his attention shifts from Jesus to the winds. As the strength of the winds take hold of his mind, it also captures his emotions and he becomes frightened. His connection to Jesus falters, and he begins to sink. He cries out to the Lord who immediately stretches out his hand to save him.<sup>vi</sup>

Jesus' comment to Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" helps Peter understand why he sank. Peter has faith. It took courage to enter into the mystery of Jesus, to try to live out of it. But he had not yet learned perseverance. His doubting came when he allowed what threatened him to capture his mind and heart. His inner focus on the reality of Jesus was replaced by an outer preoccupation with the wind. So he sank.<sup>vii</sup>

The act of sinking shows Peter's faith to be still immature, little. But knowing why he sank is a step towards greater faith and to learn from Jesus the way of fearlessness. But as always, Peter eventually learns from his mistakes. Both Peter's failures and his ability to learn from them endears him to us. He is every Christian.

Once Jesus joins his disciples in the boat of the church, the forces of darkness lose their powers. The winds die, not the disciples. They are safe as long as Jesus is 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>viii</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 dark 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" Days of the Lord, v.4, Ordinary Time, Year A (Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press, 1992) 158

ii" Roland J. Faley, Footprints on the Mountain (N.Y., Paulist Press, 1994) 526

iii" Roland J. Faley, 526

iv" John Shea, The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers (Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press, 2004) 248

v" John Shea, 248

vi" John Shea, 248

vii" John Shea, 248

viii" John Shea, 249